Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Hunter Dunaway

Interviewer: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey

Volume 1080
2006
Biography

Hunter Dunaway was born on September 28, 1963, in Nurnburg, Germany to Fred and Caroline Dunaway. His father was a military pilot for twenty years, and his mother worked as a registered representative for Paine Webber and then for Mutual of New York Group. They are both retired and living on Back Bay, Biloxi.

Hunter earned a BA in Political Science and History from the University of Oklahoma. He served in the U.S. military, retiring as a captain. His working life has included working in the Oklahoma oil fields, for cable television in Tacoma, Washington, military service, and working as an engineer in Biloxi, Mississippi. At the time of this interview he worked for the Beau Rivage Casino. He enjoys hunting, fishing, hiking, photography, and computers.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

HUNTER DUNAWAY

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Hunter Dunaway and is taking place on October 27, 2006. The interviewer is Stephanie Scull-DeArmey. Also present is photographer Jackson Hill.

Scull-DeArmey: This is an interview for the Center for Oral History at The University of Southern Mississippi, the Hurricane Katrina Project. Today is October 27? Is that right? Twenty-seventh, 2006. The interviewer is with Hunter Dunaway at his home, which today is a FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailer in Biloxi, Mississippi. The interviewer is Stephanie Scull Millet [DeArmey]. And I’m going to ask Hunter just for the record to state his name and spell it please.


Scull-DeArmey: Thank you. I also want to thank you for taking time to do the interview with us today.

Dunaway: Sure.

Scull-DeArmey: And ask you just to begin at the beginning and tell me a little bit about your childhood, how you grew up.

Dunaway: My father was in the military, so we moved around a lot, and so we lived all over the state of Missouri. Let’s see. Where did we end up after that? From Fort Leavenworth, Fort Leonard Wood, moved around a lot and both my parents’ family being from Alabama and Mississippi, I would spend my summers down here usually, so that’s how I became to know the Biloxi Gulf Coast.

Scull-DeArmey: What was a summer in Mississippi like when you were a kid?

Dunaway: Hot. (laughter) Lots of sweet tea that my aunt used to make that was always good and always running around on the beach or in the woods, and fishing and crabbing and floundering, stuff like that.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. Were there any hurricanes in your childhood that you were a part of in the summer?

Dunaway: No. We came down and helped my grandmother out a couple times after Hurricane Fredrick, and there was another one I can’t remember the name of, but you
know, I had seen what these hurricanes were capable of whenever I was young and spent a lot of time in Oklahoma and experienced a couple of tornadoes.

Scull-DeArmey: What are your memories of what the Mississippi Gulf Coast was like after Fredrick?

Dunaway: Well, back then, it was just a lazy, sleepy, backwater town. I mean, there was nothing to do here. They had a putt-putt golf course and a swimming pool or two, and that was really about it, you know, lots of good places to eat. But before the gaming industry came, Biloxi was, you know, it was Hooterville. (laughter) It was very old, old town and a small town.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you remember any of the damage that was evident after Hurricane Fredrick?

Dunaway: Well, my grandmother lived in Daphne, which is on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay, so that’s where we were at mostly, just lots and lots of trees down.

Scull-DeArmey: All right. Well, we’re going to fast-forward to Hurricane Katrina, August of 2005, and you were living in Biloxi?

Dunaway: I was living here.

Scull-DeArmey: Here. When did you become aware that Hurricane Katrina was out there?

Dunaway: Whenever it was still in the Atlantic, actually. Part of my job at work is to monitor the weather, and I have a computer there, so I’m always tracking any kind of storms that come in.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, I forgot to ask you; tell me what you do. Tell me about your job.

Dunaway: I work in the Fire Command Center at the Beau Rivage [Casino], so I monitor all the alarms and just basically all the systems inside the building.

Scull-DeArmey: And the weather as well.

Dunaway: And the weather as well because we have to be concerned about when to turn generators on, and things like that, if we lose power, all those kinds of issues.

Scull-DeArmey: So when Hurricane Katrina started moving, I remember your dad said they became aware of it when it was the wave off of the coast of Africa, but when you became aware of it? When you were watching it from the Beau Rivage, how did it appear to you? When did you start thinking it would mean evacuating or not evacuating?
**Dunaway:** Whenever they started placing the projections. It was moving east to west, and it was keeping a pretty steady course, and they kept predicting it was going to turn north. Of course, all their predictions were wrong about when and where it was going to turn north. I really wasn’t—you know, I was keeping a wary eye on it, but once I saw that it did make the turn to the north, that’s when I knew that it was going to be big and bad. It was already a huge, huge storm, and that’s whenever I started getting hackles on my back, knowing that something serious was fixing to happen.

**Scull-DeArmey:** What was the reaction at the Beau Rivage?

**Dunaway:** We boarded everything up, sandbagged everything we could. I boarded up my house; I boarded up my mom and dad’s house. I spent the three days before the storm with virtually no sleep and just completely preoccupied with preparing for the storm.

**Scull-DeArmey:** For the record, for people who may never have experienced a hurricane, precisely what do you do when you use boards and sandbags to prepare for a hurricane?

**Dunaway:** Well, the sandbags are to stop the water from getting into the doors at the Beau Rivage. Like anything else, it’s a good barrier to put up to prevent water from coming in, you know, provided the water doesn’t get over the sandbags. Boarding up the windows, of course, is to just stop flying debris from breaking the windows. And you don’t want to have any broken windows on your house during a hurricane because the winds will lift the roof off.

**Scull-DeArmey:** How many windows do you think you boarded up over at the Beau Rivage?

**Dunaway:** Well, there was twenty or thirty of us working, and we boarded up everything that we could reach, without a ladder, all the way around the building.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Beau Rivage is a huge casino. What is the capacity? For the record, can you give anyone an idea of the size of the casino and really how huge a task it was to board up those windows?

**Dunaway:** Well, the hotel’s got sixteen hundred rooms, and the gaming floor’s probably, gosh, it’s a hundred and fifty yards long, probably fifty, sixty wide. I couldn’t tell you how many machines they have. I think it’s thirty-six hundred slot machines or something along that order. It’s a big operation, and that’s not including all the public areas, you know. The what? Nine restaurants and fifteen stores.

**Scull-DeArmey:** There’s an auditorium. I remember the Cirque de Soleil came there.
Dunaway: Right.

Scull-DeArmey: And they had—

Dunaway: And a big showroom and ballrooms and all sorts of facilities for any kind of gathering.

Scull-DeArmey: So who made the decision at the Beau Rivage about closing down and evacuating?

Dunaway: I don’t think the Beau Rivage did. That was actually, they were getting their marching orders from the City, and the City was making the determination of whether or not to evacuate. So they were waiting; they waited for the City to come forward and say, “Evacuate.”

Scull-DeArmey: Do you remember when that happened?

Dunaway: I left work at the Beau Rivage, I think, on Saturday; well, it was about noon on Saturday, and after—I can’t really remember. If Katrina did one thing to me, it erased my brain. I can’t remember names or dates or times. It’s really bizarre. (laughter) But I believe it was Saturday morning that they finally told us that we could leave.

Scull-DeArmey: What were you feeling at that time?

Dunaway: Anxiety. I had a friend of mine at work who I haven’t seen since, and he came up to me and was asking me what I felt like he should do for the storm. Him and his family lived in Gulfport, and very frankly, I told him he needed to go home and pack up as much stuff as he could and get out of town because this was going to be a life-changing event.

Scull-DeArmey: Excuse us just a minute. There’s a knock at the door, and I think it’s the photographer from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Dunaway: Yeah. (brief interruption)

Scull-DeArmey: So at this point in the interview, we have with us a photographer from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* whose name is?

Hill: Jackson Hill.

Scull-DeArmey: Jackson Hill, thank you. So Hunter, your friend from Gulfport was asking you for advice about what to do.

Dunaway: Um-hm.
Scull-DeArmey: And you told him?

Dunaway: That’s whenever I told him he needed to go home and pack up his family and everything he could carry and get out of town because this was going to be a life-changing event.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. So you’re leaving the Beau Rivage. The City has told people to evacuate. What was your next move?

Dunaway: I believe after that, I went straight to my parents’ house. They had so much stuff; they live on the water on the Back Bay there, and they have so much stuff that needed to be taken care of, you know, plants and just tons of stuff to clean up in their yard. And so I was busy over there doing everything I could to square away their property. And really all I did at my house was just board up the windows and took all my important paperwork and stuff like that and put it up in the top of my closet in plastic bags.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. And now, you left the Beau Rivage. Did you come by here to Biloxi and board up your windows before you went to your parents’ house?

Dunaway: I think, yeah, I came home and changed clothes and boarded up and grabbed a little bit of gear and then went over to my mom and dad’s house.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. And that was the last time you saw your house?

Dunaway: Um-hm.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. OK. So tell me what happened at your parents’ house.

Dunaway: Well, we got over there. There’s actually a duplex on this property, and the guy that was renting from me went with me. He’s a friend of mine, long-time friend of mine, and so we went over to my mom and dad’s house, and I had spent all week long trying to talk them into leaving, but of course they wouldn’t leave, their logic being, “Well, if there is a lot of damage, we’ll be here to pick stuff up.” And of course, no son in his right mind is going to leave his mom and dad here and then leave, which was what I was wanting to do, was get out of town. So I went over there to stay with them. We helped them out, boarding the house up and moving everything we could do into the attic, and that sort of thing.

Scull-DeArmey: And the renters, was the duplex here in Biloxi?

Dunaway: It was right here.

Scull-DeArmey: And the renters went with you to your parents’ house?

Dunaway: Yeah, it was just one guy.
Scull-DeArmey: One guy.

Dunaway: Yeah, um-hm.

Scull-DeArmey: And did he stay with you—

Dunaway: Yes.

Scull-DeArmey: —for the duration of the storm?

Dunaway: Yes.

Scull-DeArmey: You tried to get your parents to leave town?

Dunaway: Um-hm.

Scull-DeArmey: What was their reaction to that?

Dunaway: Well, they said they didn’t want to leave because if there was damage to the house, they were afraid that looters or just the exposure to the weather would ruin any things that were salvageable. So I stayed with them to help them clean up after the storm, which we knew there was going to be clean up. I was here for Hurricane Georges, and there was about a five-foot-tall wall of debris all through the backyard, but it was still thirty, forty feet away from the house.

Scull-DeArmey: On Back Bay.

Dunaway: Um-hm.

Scull-DeArmey: Biloxi. For the record, for people who don’t know what Back Bay Biloxi is, could you just describe a little bit what your parents’ house was like, how far it was from the water?

Dunaway: The Back Bay is all the water area behind the peninsula of Biloxi. Keesler Air Force Base runs back there, the end of the airstrip; to the east of the airstrip there is a string of private property. Their house was one of those waterfront properties there. They had two hundred and ten feet of waterfront, and the house was, I’d say, it’s about sixty yards from the water, say about fifty meters. And the story I always told was that during Hurricane Camille, the water only got to the back door; it never actually got in the house.

Scull-DeArmey: And Camille, for the record, was in 1969, a Category Five storm. Katrina, I believe, was a [Category] Three when it came ashore?

Dunaway: Was it a Three or Four?
Scull-DeArmey: Maybe a Four.

Dunaway: I believe it was a Four.

Scull-DeArmey: So Camille was the benchmark for a lot of people.

Dunaway: Right. And I think that’s what got a lot of people in trouble. That’s all you heard all over town before the storm was, “Well, the water only got to here during Camille.” And so everybody set that as the benchmark, and that’s what they did their preparations for, was to meet that level of a threat from the sea.

Scull-DeArmey: What do you think about the way they grade hurricanes? You know, Katrina being a Four, doing so much more damage than Camille did, Camille being a five?

Dunaway: Right. Well, Camille was a Five, but the way they rate the hurricanes is on wind speed; it has nothing to do with the size of the storm or the surge that it’s creating. So it’s kind of a misnomer. It’d work great if you were talking about just on-land measurements, but they’re not including all the variables whenever it’s out over the water. That’s probably something they need to work on. And my God, Katrina was a Six.

Scull-DeArmey: Right. When you look at the difference in the size of the two storms, Katrina being larger meant that it would, the duration would be longer. So a seventy-mile-an-hour wind for three hours does more damage than a seventy-mile-an-hour wind for—

Dunaway: Right, for an hour. It stresses any kind of structures, and the wind is like water. It’ll find a weak point and focus on that weak point. Almost sometimes seems like it’s, sometimes got a mind of its own. But yeah, during the storm itself, I was so concerned about the water that the wind was secondary; it wasn’t a big concern. I mean, “So what? It’s real windy.” (laughter) You know. Occasional tree limb flying by you have to watch out for, and strangely you get a sense of vertigo. I didn’t spend—at the eight hours of the storm I think I was inside probably for only an hour. I spent the entire storm, I was swimming up and down the street at my mom and dad’s trying to help. It’s a well-to-do neighborhood over there, not wealthy, but well off, and of course everybody there is over sixty, that whole street, just about everybody. So I was swimming up and down the road, me and the guy that rented the other half of the duplex, trying to help people, trying to see if anybody needed help, and help some people off roofs, and checked on people to make sure they got up into their second floors OK, and stuff like that.

Scull-DeArmey: You were able to swim and not be swept away by currents?
Dunaway: It wasn’t easy. You had to grab onto whatever you could to pull yourself along. There’s a method they teach you in lifesaving and the military also, just holding your breath and going down to the bottom and then bouncing off the bottom to keep your head up. And if you do that into a forward angle, then you can make forward progress like that. The hardest part was, it wasn’t swimming; it was more climbing than swimming because there was so much debris in the water that literally it was just like—I don’t know—swimming through a bowl of Fruit Loops or something, all the furniture. It was just incredible how much debris there was in the water, tree limbs and snakes and red ants and all that kind of stuff.

Scull-DeArmey: What was going through your mind as you were doing that?

Dunaway: I was too busy to let fear or anything like that creep into you. And I’ve got military training, and so I don’t scare easy. So that helped, but just worrying about all those old people on that street that can’t swim or fight the debris or anything like that. The house we ended up staying at, which was across the street from my mom and dad’s after we had to vacate my mom and dad’s house, another house across the street from them had two ninety-year-old, I think, people living there. And whenever we went over there, we didn’t realize for a long time that they were even there, and then we went over there to try and find them, and it was a nightmare in that house, just everything was floating around in the water and trying to get them out, and we finally got them out, and this was while the water was still only knee/thigh-deep. And Danny Gwinn(?) and several other people went over there and hustled them out of the house and put them in their car and drove them across the street. It was probably the shortest drive in history, but it was a sight to see. (laughter) You know. He just floored it, and we were shooting a rooster tail sixty feet up in the air and fishtailing through the water over into the street and drove actually in to the house where we were staying at, trying to get them as close to the house as possible. And we took them out of there, and they were all cut up and bruised from hitting debris in their house. And I couldn’t believe it whenever I went in there, they were just in shock; they were just both standing around, looking around, going, “Holy shit!” (laughter) “What happened?”

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. Well, let’s back up a little bit. When you were at your parents’ house, and the storm comes on, tell us about how that progressed. Just describe it as best you can.

Dunaway: The first thing I saw disintegrate was my neighbor’s pier house, Lloyd Moon’s(?) house, his pier house. And fortunately for him, he’s got a brick house that’s two stories tall. They got up in the upstairs. They were OK.

Scull-DeArmey: How big was the pier house? What is a pier house for?

Dunaway: It was an enclosure for his boat, a roofed enclosure for his boat. And of course, I saw the roof come off, and then our pier gave way. Sections of it started floating off, floating up into the yard towards the house. Somebody had, I’m going to say about a twenty-four-foot sailboat that was anchored out in the Back Bay, and we
were joking the previous day that, “Yeah. We’re going to see that up-close and personal if the storm hits.” And it did; it came up in the yard. It damaged trees; the keel dug a big rut in the yard. Finally, I was standing out there taking pictures of it; I was standing on our back porch with my hand on the sailboat that was rocking in the water. And eventually the water raised up a couple more feet, and the sailboat ended up going through my mom and dad’s bedroom and broke that corner of the house off. But once the water came in, once the water was filling the floor of the house, that’s whenever we went over to the neighbor’s house. He’s got a big concrete house over there that he’s—concrete roof. It’s a really solid house. I guess some German engineer built it back in the late [19]40s, and it’s eight inches thick of concrete, and just a massive—it’s a bunker. So I figured we’d be safe over there (laughter) from any kind of flying debris or anything like that. Unfortunately we weren’t planning on six feet of water being in the middle of the road. So that was—

Scull-DeArmey: So the journey across the street took you and your parents and what was your renter’s name?

Dunaway: Rick.

Scull-DeArmey: Rick through six feet of water in the street.

Dunaway: Well, we got them over there before the water got that deep. Being an infantryman, I had set back some gear. I had canteens and food and dry socks and candy bars and stuff like that that I had put into my (inaudible) gear, and I had taken all that stuff over to this Forrest Hearn’s(?) house.

Scull-DeArmey: The concrete house.

Dunaway: The concrete house, as well, and had stashed it in one of his bedrooms there, knowing that it was going to be something we were going to need because it was looking pretty bad at that point. The water was probably a foot deep in the street, and that’s whenever we moved my mom and dad over to their house, and I’m not sure exactly when, there was a Vietnamese lady who, I don’t know where she—who brought her over or how she got there. She might have walked, but she didn’t know how to swim, and she was an acquaintance. In fact, the house that I was living in, the duplex, I had bought from her. And she of course, knew my mom and dad and lives over there in that neighborhood. And she was there, and then we got the two people across the street over there, so our little group was growing—

Scull-DeArmey: Right, the ninety-year-olds.

Dunaway: —yeah, as the day went on. Pretty soon all the cars were floating around the neighborhood. The water got that high. The neighbor’s house completely collapsed; I mean, it was erased off its foundations. Yeah, watching all the cars float around was really disconcerting, realizing that once this thing was gone, we weren’t
going to have any transportation, (laughter) and so we knew we were going to be stuck for days if not weeks.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Right. Now you said you had a sense of vertigo somehow?

**Dunaway:** Yeah, yeah. Whenever I was out there swimming up and down the street, you’re clambering over all this debris, and all the trees are moving like this, and of course, you have the motion of the waves as well, so it’s hard to maintain; if your feet aren’t on solid ground, you could really get confused about what your surroundings are.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Fortunately this storm occurred during daylight hours.

**Dunaway:** Amen to that, yes.

**Scull-DeArmey:** So what was visibility like? Was it cloudy or clear?

**Dunaway:** You could probably see a hundred meters, maybe. It would just depend. Gusts would come by, and your visibility would go to six feet, and then it’d break a little bit. It just really came like that; it was relentless in how it just wave after wave after wave. The wind was almost like the water, as it would come through. You’d get these really powerful gusts that would knock you off your feet, and then it’d ebb for ten, fifteen seconds, and then another one would come. So it was kind of like that for eight hours straight.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Wow. So what was the maximum of the group that congregated there in the concrete house?

**Dunaway:** Let’s see; there was me and Rick and gosh, I can’t even remember the Vietnamese lady’s name, and her, Forrest Hearn, the guy that owned the concrete house, the two people from across the street.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Your parents, that would be nine.

**Dunaway:** My parents, yeah, I think that was nine.

**Scull-DeArmey:** The ninety-year-olds, would that be eleven?

**Dunaway:** No. I included them; that was nine.

**Scull-DeArmey:** OK. There was a man who had an above-knee amputation.

**Dunaway:** That’s Forrest, yeah. He’s the guy that owned the house, the concrete house that we were in.
Scull-DeArmey: So the nine of you are there. You’re probably up on the second floor.

Dunaway: No, there was no second floor.

Scull-DeArmey: There was no second floor. Hm.

Dunaway: We were standing; he has kind of an enclosed backyard, and so we were around back of the house trying to stay out of the wind and the debris; probably thirty feet away from us in his backyard is a giant oak tree, and it just fell over. If the tree had been thirty more feet the other way, then we would have had all those branches on top of us, but fortunately we were closer to the trunk, so whenever it went over, we didn’t catch any. It went over into Danny Gwinn’s yard and tore up his fence and his boat and all kinds of stuff there, his barn. And then what was a bit scary was standing there in the yard and watching the water come from the east, and then Rick turns around and points over to where that tree had fallen down and says, “Look!” And we turned and looked and just saw waves, small waves, working their way up from completely a different direction from where all the Back Bay water was. There’s a kind of a bayou that runs back there, and that water had filled that bayou and was now coming at us from a different direction. Well, it was coming at us from two directions. Ironically, there was this little Boston whaler; it’s about a six-foot long boat that you always see upside-down on the front of bigger boats that people use to get back and forth to the beach whenever they’re out, going to the islands of what have you.

Scull-DeArmey: A dinghy?

Dunaway: Yeah, a dinghy, but Boston whalers are basically unsinkable; they’re Styrofoam with stamped fiberglass over it. And that thing had washed up in their yard, my mom and dad’s yard during Hurricane Georges, and we ran ads in the paper, and nobody ever claimed it. So we just kept it, and we ended up putting the two ninety-year-olds and the Vietnamese lady that couldn’t swim, and the one-legged man in that boat, and my mom actually stood in the doorway of the house and held them close to the house in that dinghy for hours, for a couple of hours, I guess. And well, that’s getting a little forward. Standing there in the yard whenever that water started coming in, once the water hit my ankles, it went from my ankles to my knees in probably ten minutes or less. And then it went from my knees to my chest in another twenty, and once it got up to about chest height, the water was starting to come in the windowsills of the house, starting to leak through the windowsills, and then everything just imploded. The doors blew off the house; the front door blew off; the back door blew off, almost hit my mom. And then it was just this massive rush of water, and everything inside the house got sucked out the back windows and the back doors, and the neighbors’ house came in the front. That gear that I was talking about that I had stashed; it got sucked out, never saw it again.

Scull-DeArmey: Did you feel it pulling on you? Were the people—
**Dunaway:** Oh, yeah. I mean, it was really—I mean, you can’t stand up against it. It would knock you down. Whenever the doors blew off and everything, even though we were already in waist-deep water, it took everybody in the house off their feet. And that’s—

**Scull-DeArmey:** How did you keep from being washed out the window yourself?

**Dunaway:** Just all the debris that was in the house.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Holding onto it?

**Dunaway:** Um-hm, mattresses and coffee tables.

**Scull-DeArmey:** So your mom’s holding onto the boat with the people in it—

**Dunaway:** Well, at that point, that’s whenever we grabbed them. We had been collecting boats that were floating by because we knew we might need them, and that’s whenever we loaded all them in there, and my mom stood with her arm around the door frame and the other arm on the boat and kept them up under the eave of the house. If the water would have got two feet higher, I don’t know how many of us would have made it because once the water would have got two feet higher, we would have had to make a run for it, and the only way to make a run for it would be to go through, a couple of yards through all this massive waves and debris and stuff and try and get in the second floor of a building, and that would be no guarantee either, because who’s to say that that building is not going to collapse, which was my biggest fear of getting into a two-story building.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Two feet higher would have been over your head, right?

**Dunaway:** Oh, yeah, yeah. And they wouldn’t have been able to stay under the eave of the house, either, because their heads were already bouncing off the eave of the house. I mean, they had to duck down whenever they were riding that dinghy. Fortunately there wasn’t a lot of wave action because it was creating an eddy around that portion of his house there; it was kind of an L-shaped corner there that we could get them up into.

**Scull-DeArmey:** So the concrete house turned out to be somewhat hurricane-proof, after all.

**Dunaway:** Yeah, I mean, we weren’t in danger of falling debris.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Right. You had something to hold onto.

**Dunaway:** In fact, he was the first house in that whole section of the peninsula to rebuild. So yeah, he had less damage.
Scull-DeArmey: Hm. Somebody should get plans of that house. (laughter)

Dunaway: Yeah. Well, eight-inch concrete with rebar, you can’t go wrong, no matter what the situation.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. So you’re in there, and this great current’s coming through. Was that the worst of it? Did it start to abate after that?

Dunaway: Like I say, I was really busy during that period.

Scull-DeArmey: What were you doing?

Dunaway: I was swimming around, trying to find anything, trying to see if people needed help. I swam all the way to the end of Kensington Drive there, and we found out later that one of the houses that we had gone to, that Rick and I had gone to, a lady had passed away in there. She was a widow, and I’m not sure what the status of her kids were or anything, but she stayed alone in the house and was right on the water there. She didn’t make it, and another lady on the other end of the street, the other extreme end of the street didn’t make it either, but I didn’t know her. I didn’t know anything about her. We found one lady and her son that were trapped on the roof, and fortunately an oak tree had fallen on the roof, so we had a way to get them down. And we got them out, and took them around behind their house. Just going around checking houses, fortunately most of the people had evacuated, so we didn’t have too many people to worry about. Once I made it back to where my mom and dad were, we all just kind of huddled together and waited it out. I can’t remember how long it was, and then finally the water started to go out. And the curious thing for me was that if I wasn’t so concerned about everybody, I would have just been in awe of the spectacle of—it’s not every day you see a whole town destroyed. And the other odd thing about it was, you think of the water receding and it just kind of goes away and leaves everything sitting there, but it didn’t. I talked about that debris pile in the backyard from Hurricane Georges. There was no debris after Katrina; it sucked everything out. My mom and dad had a player piano, and those things weigh two thousand pounds, and we never saw a trace off it, not the baffles or the pedals or nothing. This is stuff that’s solid metal, and there was no debris; it sucked everything into the water.

Scull-DeArmey: Amazing. Big trees stayed where they were; that couldn’t be sucked around.

Dunaway: Pretty much big trees, yeah. Well, and still, even some of those, you can still see them sticking out of the water in the Back Bay.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. What’s the navigability of the Back Bay like now?

Dunaway: The city did a side scan SONAR (Sound Navigation and Ranging) of the channel, and it was full, just full of debris. They had to get a dredge in there and
dredge it all out. I saw people that day, the day after the storm, in boats, just driving as fast as they could up and down the Back Bay, and I just could not understand how stupid you must be to do that. And I mean there were sunk boats and debris everywhere; it was just absolutely everywhere.

**Scull-DeArmey:** The recorder’s doing something I don’t understand, but I guess I’m just going to have to have faith that it’s really recording; it’s on track nine. You know what? Let me just pause, and start recording again, and maybe it’ll start behaving the way I think it should. (laughter) So when did it start receding and getting better?

**Dunaway:** What time?

**Scull-DeArmey:** Well, not what time, but how did you know that it was receding? You said it didn’t all just leave at once.

**Dunaway:** Right. Well, we were standing in the house, and whenever we could start seeing the grass line, that’s whenever we knew the water was going down. You could see, like, a bathtub ring.

**Scull-DeArmey:** I see, um-hm.

**Dunaway:** So once it started receding, we knew that we had made it through the worst of it. Of course the bad thing about hurricanes is the hurricane is only the beginning. (laughter) It’s the aftermath that’s tough.

**Scull-DeArmey:** So what did happen? What happened next after the water receded?

**Dunaway:** After the water receded, everybody was just wandering around in a daze. I saw, walking down the same street within feet of each other, cats, dogs, squirrels, nutria, rats, seagulls. They were missing patches of hair; I don’t know if their hair fell out from fright, or if it was debris had hit them, or what it was. But I mean everything, even the animals, the whole city was just in a complete daze. And what can you do? You walk around going, “God, where do I start first?” What do you do? What do you look for first? Of course, after ten minutes of trying to find serious valuables, that’s whenever everybody realized that finding food, water, and liquor were more important than anything you owned before. Like I say, the folks on that street are pretty well off, so there were plenty of liquor bottles lying around, so we were fortunate in that regard, I guess, because once you’ve lost everything you own, what do you do? And I ran into several people that were trying to report on it, and they were just shocked that everybody in town seemed to be sitting around, drinking. (laughter) It’s like, “Well, what do you expect?” (laughter) “What do you want us to do? You want us to start rebuilding? Where’s my hammer?” (laughter)

**Scull-DeArmey:** What about injuries?
Dunaway: Everybody was pretty cut up, and a lot of small cuts and bruises. Fortunately nothing serious.

Scull-DeArmey: The worry in a situation like that is a small cut getting infected and becoming a big problem. No antibiotics lying around anymore.

Dunaway: No. Well, the neighbor, the Danny Gwinn guy, his house was elevated about four feet, so the water only got three or four feet deep in his house, and so his medicine cabinets in his bathroom, for example, were OK. So we were able to get some materials that way. Let’s see. Everybody just pitched in; it’s such a great neighborhood over there. Everybody worked together. As soon as the storm was passed, we all walked around and made sure each other were OK, and then it was a group effort. It wasn’t, you know, everybody fend for himself. It was the whole neighborhood gathered together and were, “OK. We need ice. Who’s going for ice? We need food. Who’s got food?” You know, just trying to get some modicum of normalcy back and of course, also very important was to keep everybody busy because melancholy’ll set in in a hurry if you just stand around in your debris pile. After a couple of hours of making sure everybody was taken care of there, that’s whenever I walked back here. I walked down Porter Avenue to [Highway] 90 to the lighthouse and then walked on foot from [Highway] 90 to here. At some point during the storm, I had lost my shoes, so I was wearing a pair of shoes that I found that were too small for me, and of course they were wet. And I walked all the way back here, and by the time I got here, my feet were already a bloody mess. My house was broken into three pieces, and it was out in the street, out in the middle of the street out here. It had actually bashed into my neighbor’s house. They had a little brick house here. It had bashed into it, broke into three pieces, and washed out into the street.

Scull-DeArmey: Swept off the foundation.

Dunaway: Yeah. It was on three-foot pilings, and there was some salvageable stuff. I grabbed a couple of items of clothes, and I grabbed my guns, and loaded them on my shoulder and carried them back to my mom and dad’s house. Walked back down Division Street and got to see firsthand all the looting that was going on down there. It was really shameful, and it made me extremely angry, and there’s probably a lot of people that are lucky that my guns were full of mud.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, that was probably a dangerous situation, to be witnessing.

Dunaway: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: Puts you in danger.

Dunaway: It was crazy. I mean, these people had their kids dragging wagons over to the Dollar Store down there and just loading up everything. The house that sat directly across the street from the Dollar Store, all the way around three sides of the house that I could see, were covered with shopping bags. The porch of the house was
stacked floor to ceiling with stuff that they had taken out of there, and they had two cars that were parked in front. They had the stereos turned up all the way; they had three grills going in the yard, and there were thirty-five people standing around, having a cookout, laughing and joking and just like it was Mardi Gras. Yeah. I couldn’t believe it. It just made my blood boil.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Yeah. That’s a bad situation, can get dangerous in a hurry. So when you were on your way from your parents’ house here, coming down Porter and [Highway] 90, you probably didn’t have much hope of finding your house in good shape, but what were you seeing on Porter and on [Highway] 90, those first hours after Katrina?

**Dunaway:** It was just a mass of debris. I mean, it’s just a tangled, twisted mass of boards, wire, furniture and slot machines. It was like a nuclear bomb went off. I mean, the devastation was that dramatic. Once I got down to [Highway] 90 and saw the barge sitting on top of the [George] Ohr Museum, and talking to my mom and dad, they probably told you about the reunion they had with the Australian aviators.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Right.

**Dunaway:** Yeah, and all the places that we had had functions at, were just obliterated, completely gone.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Was it difficult to find your way around without landmarks?

**Dunaway:** Yes. I was looking for a couple of friends of mine, [their] houses, that live over here, and I couldn’t even find the street that they lived on, much less a house, and of course, all the way from Howard Avenue, all the way to the railroad tracks was nothing but a sea of boards. There was nothing standing, just a couple of trees, and everything else was just lumber, piles and piles of lumber.

**Scull-DeArmey:** That you had to climb over.

**Dunaway:** Sure. Yeah. I was worried about getting a nail through the foot more than anything so you had to be real careful of where you went. I had a beautifully restored [1967 Mustang; I had spent four years restoring, and I parked it on the third floor of the parking garage at the Grand [Casino], and it was underwater; it had gone underwater. I opened the hood, and it was full of pine needles. There was a three-hundred-pound dead pig laying beside that obviously came off of one of the islands. Now, whether it was Deer Island or Ship Island or Horn [Island], I don’t know. But it was a wild boar. I just couldn’t believe that the water got that high.

**Scull-DeArmey:** I know.

**Dunaway:** Whenever I parked my car, Rick was with me; he was giving me a ride back in his car, and we both walked to the edge and looked over the edge and stood
there for about two or three minutes going, “Well, you think it’ll be safe here?” And I said, “Well, it’s got the wall here.” Because I was primarily concerned with flying debris. I didn’t want body damage and stuff like that, and we considered going up one more floor, but then we went and looked over the edge, and it’s thirty feet to the ground. And we said, “There’s no way the water’s going to get this high.” Well, it did.

**Scull-DeArmey:** How high was it, do you think?

**Dunaway:** It had to be thirty-six feet right there in that one spot. The hill, there’s a little bit of a rise there on top of the hill where Howard Avenue runs, and there was a pile of debris there, right there on Oak Street and Howard that was probably thirty feet high. I don’t know how many houses were there, but that created a dam, and it allowed that water to get a lot higher there than it actually did here. Right here the water was only twenty feet deep, from what I understand. And—

**Scull-DeArmey:** That first obstacle, land or debris or whatever it is that the water hits, pushes it up, makes it higher.

**Dunaway:** Right. So your water on your uphill side from the debris is not going to be as high as it is behind that wall, and yeah, I just couldn’t believe it. There was nothing standing. Well, a few houses here and there, but they were completely gutted. The roofs, like my mom and dad’s house, everything was washed out but the roof. It was really amazing. I’ve got some pictures on the computer, as a matter of fact. I have a buddy of mine that’s an aviator, and we made one pass up and down the beach, and I took some aerial photographs you might want to look at.

**Scull-DeArmey:** That’s fabulous; that’s good. So after you came here, you got some of your stuff. You went back to your parents’ house. What happened in the next couple of days over there?

**Dunaway:** Well, let’s see. I guess it was the second or third day after the storm, there was a house in the middle of the street at the beginning of the road, so you couldn’t drive down the road. You could barely walk down the road; there was so many tree limbs and stuff falling in the way, and wires. It’s amazing how much wiring is in the house, and you tear up a hundred houses and pile the wire up on the ground, and it’s a mess. But that third day, here comes my sister walking through the debris field, and she lives in Seattle. (laughter) She was the first people that we had seen that didn’t live on Kensington. And so she had managed to organize a rescue party, fly to Pensacola, get a rental car, go to Wal-Mart, load it with stuff, get with my cousin, load his SUV [suburban utility vehicle] up and drive over here before we ever saw any kind of rescue workers. I just thank God that the I-110 bridge stayed intact. If the I-110 bridge would have gone out, there would have been some serious, serious problems.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Hunger, thirst, people—
Dunaway: Um-hm, because there wasn’t anything coming in from the west, and if this peninsula would have been completely isolated for who knows how long if that bridge would have gone out, so it was really fortunate.

Scull-DeArmey: What were you eating and drinking in those three days before your sister arrived?

Dunaway: Whatever we could find.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. You could find enough?

Dunaway: Oh, yeah. Yeah, plenty of canned goods and stuff like that, and like I say, some of the houses that were elevated, their upper cabinets were OK. So that’s where everybody keeps their crackers and stuff like that, so we did all right. I mean it wasn’t Outback, but it was enough to sustain us, lots of Vienna sausages. (laughter) Little stuff like that. But once my sister got there, she had brought everything we needed, gloves, boots, first-aid kits, antibiotics, fried chicken. She had really loaded up, and so that was good. That was a relief effort for the whole neighborhood, benefited from that.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. Were any of you needing to get to a hospital or to a doctor?

Dunaway: No. Nobody in that area was that seriously injured, fortunately. That’s the way these things are; either you’re alive and OK, or you’re dead. There’s not a lot of—I mean, sure, minor injuries, but I didn’t run into a lot of broken bones or anything like that. Fortunately.

Scull-DeArmey: We interviewed some nurses at Biloxi Regional. Biloxi Regional stayed open during the storm. Of course, there was a period of time when nobody could get there, but in those hours following, lots and lots of people showed up. And there’s a certain kind of bacteria that’s pretty nasty, but it only lives deep, deep out to sea, but that was the kind of bacteria they were seeing in the cuts, in the small cuts and injuries.

Dunaway: Maybe that’s what happened to my eye. It’s got all this white stuff growing around it, and I don’t—

Scull-DeArmey: Oh, man! Since the storm?

Dunaway: Yeah. I’m sure it had something to do with Katrina. (laughter) So I got to go have that operated on. But fortunately we didn’t have any major cuts, which was pretty astounding considering how much crap I had to go through that day, swimming through all that debris.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. You must have a pretty good immune system.
Dunaway: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: I know at Biloxi Regional, they had a guy come through with a temperature of 108 degrees, and he didn’t make it.

Dunaway: And he was still alive?

Scull-DeArmey: He didn’t make it, but that was—he had some kind of infection going on. So you guys must have had good immune systems over there, started taking antibiotics. What is your sister’s name?

Dunaway: Fran.

Scull-DeArmey: Started taking antibiotics after Fran got there.

Dunaway: Right, yeah. Her roommate in Seattle is a PA, physician’s assistant, so we had our own personal doctor, right there.

Scull-DeArmey: She came with?

Dunaway: Yeah. She was pumping us all full of antibiotics and everything else we needed, so we were in good shape after that.

Scull-DeArmey: That probably made a big difference to you, to that group of people.

Dunaway: That and we all went out and gathered up water hoses. We must have had a half a mile of water hoses all stitched together, and found one of these Air Force houses on Keesler [Air Force Base] there that had water and ran that hose and hooked it up on the spigot, and then we had one of those little beach chairs, you know? The legs are only about that long?

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Dunaway: And we’d all take turns sitting in the driveway, taking showers (laughter) under the hose.

Scull-DeArmey: Keeping cool a little bit.

Dunaway: Yeah, keeping cool and clean is what we were primarily concerned with because we knew that—I mean, there were dead animals everywhere, dead animals and (inaudible). I had to bury fifteen dogs and cats. And that’s sad for the animal, but it’s hard to listen to the owners crying and everything about what they should have done to save the animals, but nobody expected the water to be that deep. It’s just insane how deep it was. Some of those houses in those low areas over there were completely underwater.
Scull-DeArmey: Right, yeah.

Dunaway: It’s just astounding.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. So I know Fran drove in. She had a rental car. How close could she get to where you were?

Dunaway: About two hundred meters, two hundred and fifty meters down the road to that house was in the middle of the street, a roof of a house.

Scull-DeArmey: So did people stay, or did they make use of the rental cars to leave the area? What happened next?

Dunaway: I don’t know; we didn’t move for three or four days. I mean, we didn’t have anywhere to go, and we knew the traffic was—we had a couple of people that went out and then came back, and we were hearing reports about how bad the traffic was, going either direction. It wouldn’t matter; we’d be stuck in the middle of it. So we talked about it and said, “Well, we can hit the road and sit in traffic for the next three days, or we can just sit here.” So we decided to stay there and go through all my mom and dad’s personal items and find as much as we could, dig it out of the mud. And my sister actually went through half the yard with a spatula, trying to find jewelry.

Scull-DeArmey: Wow. What about your stuff here?

Dunaway: I came back the second time on the second day after the storm, or the third day; it was the day my sister got there. And once I knew that she was looking after them, I came back here. Whenever I got here, it had already been looted, and what really made me mad was that stuff that they didn’t want, they just broke. I had some beer steins from Germany that were real important to me, and they just smashed them, smashed tables and just destroyed things for fun, I guess.

Scull-DeArmey: That’s terrible.

Dunaway: And then the third time I came back to try and find stuff, they had already bulldozed it. So I got destroyed, looted, and bulldozed inside of a week. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: God! I’m really sorry.

Dunaway: Yeah. I lost everything I had, and how do you replace military certificates and college diploma? You can’t get originals, and just everything. I’m a Civil War historian, and I had at least two hundred and fifty Civil War books that you can’t find anymore, that I dug out of antique shops and stuff like that; they were all gone. Of course, you’ve probably heard this a thousand times, everything everybody lost. (phone ringing) The worst thing, though, was seeing my whole family tree destroyed
because my mom collected all the family photos, and if you’ve seen any of the photographs that got in that salt water, they just turn white.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Right. They’re ruined.

**Dunaway:** And so every memory, physical, visual memory of my entire (laughter) family tree is gone now. So that was the hardest thing to take. Everything else is just material, but you lose your connection to your past like that, it’s pretty serious. I mean, I don’t have any kids, but if I do have a kid one day, he’s going to ask about his family and all that. What do you tell them? “Here’s a picture of Hurricane Katrina.” (laughter)

**Scull-DeArmey:** Yeah. Your mom mentioned to me that a few people were sending her photographs that they had of your early years.

**Dunaway:** Um-hm, yeah. That’s been nice, and my sister had managed to abscond with a few (laughter) that I didn’t know about. So we’re slowly starting to put together a few pieces.

**Scull-DeArmey:** I guess the lesson learned is, share your photographs; farm them out. (laughter)

**Dunaway:** Right, right. Make copies and spread them around. That’s absolutely true.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Call in those chips someday, yeah.

**Dunaway:** Um-hm, exactly.

**Scull-DeArmey:** There’s a lot of grieving going on in this area. A lot. Our personal artifacts, they support us and comfort us. I mean, we can live without them, but there’s a definite loss there. They’re not really just things.

**Dunaway:** Right. You got that sentimental attachment to them. Little things that don’t mean much to somebody else, might mean a lot.

**Scull-DeArmey:** They’re symbols to us of events and feelings and connections.

**Dunaway:** Right.

**Scull-DeArmey:** Yeah. They remind us of those things that are important to us. That’s probably one of the hugest losses, besides life and limb.

**Dunaway:** Right. I never did hear a final count for how many people in Biloxi died.

**Scull-DeArmey:** I don’t know, either.
Dunaway: I don’t know if they know. You know?

Scull-DeArmey: I don’t know. I don’t know how they count those things.

Dunaway: Like you said earlier, I just thank God it hit in the daytime. If it would have hit at night, there’s no telling how many people would have died.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. Many, many more.

Dunaway: Probably four or five times that number. (phone ringing) Sorry.

Scull-DeArmey: Do you need to answer that?

Dunaway: No. I’ll call them back.

Scull-DeArmey: OK. Is there anything else you’d like to add? We can take a look at these questions and see if there’s something that we haven’t covered, but—

Dunaway: Yeah. I looked those over. I felt like, considering the odds that they were looking at, I mean, all of their communication equipment, all of the rescue equipment, everything was destroyed in Biloxi. And you know, it’s real easy to sit here and say, “Well, George Bush caused Hurricane Katrina.” But of course it’s a lot more complex than that, and I felt like that our City government here in Biloxi did a hell of a job, considering what they were faced with and literally having to put everything together again, just to even start to rescue people. You had to figure out where you could get gas, and that’s not something that you would probably originally plan for in your hurricane plan, thinking that every gas station within a hundred miles is going to be destroyed.

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. But that was the reality.

Dunaway: Yeah, that was the reality. And it was five days after the storm whenever a group of Florida volunteers came down the street, and those were the first government people that we saw, and that was five days after the storm. (brief interruption)

Scull-DeArmey: What kinds of things were they doing for the community?

Dunaway: They were going around with dogs; they were looking for bodies. They were a group out of Florida.

Scull-DeArmey: So they were cadaver dogs.

Dunaway: Yeah. Yeah, they came down the street with cadaver dogs and painted the ubiquitous symbol on the house. They were the first ones we saw, and that was kind
of the indication that things were getting back to normal, once you see your first law
enforcement group, “OK. Well, they’re getting their act together now.” I guess the
next day after that, we finally left and went to Pensacola, [Florida], which was another
experience. My sister’s rental car caught on fire. (laughter) So there we were,
finally, “Yeah. We’re getting out of here!” (laughter) And people are driving by
honking. And we’re going, “Yeah!” (laughter) And then realized the catalytic
converter was on fire, so we had to abandon that plan temporarily. I think we finally
got to Pensacola about two o’clock in the morning.

Scull-DeArmey: Tell me about the fire. What happened?

Dunaway: Well, we (laughter) immediately of course jumped out of the car, and
went out, went behind the vehicle, and we were trying to wave people out of the way.
We were afraid the gas tank would catch on fire, and it would blow up and cause a big
wreck, so we were trying to get people, but they were oblivious to it. Then finally an
old pickup truck stopped, and a guy got out and reached into the back, and pulled out a
fireman’s jacket and a helmet, and he was a fireman had just got off duty; he was on
his way home to try and get a couple hours of sleep. And he had a couple of tools
with him; he just got under there and pulled the catalytic converter off of it, and we
realized we weren’t in danger there anymore, but my sister was driving it, and she
stopped on a—there was all kinds of pine needles, debris out in the road, and
whenever she pulled off onto the shoulder, she stopped on a pile of that. So that stuff
was kind of burning, too, so (laughter) it was just another nightmare.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah, pine burns real well. (laughter) Makes a big fire.

Dunaway: Yes.

Scull-DeArmey: So you guys had to abandon that car there?

Dunaway: Yeah. And one thing that really bothered me in the aftermath of it, and
I’m not sure how they could do it, if the government should come in with an ID card-
making truck and issue ID cards right there or some kind of deal, but what got my goat
was going to these relief stations to get food and ice and stuff like that, and here’s all
these people from Louisiana and Florida that are contractors that are there making
money, cutting trees and stuff out of the way, and they’re lining up to get all the free
stuff. So they have zero overhead; the only thing they had to pay for was gas, and
you’ve heard all the stories about the overcharging for cutting trees out of yards. And
so it really made me mad to see these people just using the system like that. And we
even had a guy that drove down our street, pulling a trailer, and (phone rings) this was
just the day after the storm, and he was pulling pieces of copper out of people’s
wreckage. And my mom had some words with him, and threw a beer can at him.
(laughter) Unfortunately she didn’t hit him. But these kind of situations bring out the
best and the worst in people.
Scull-DeArmey: I guess they do, yeah. They bring out the best and worst people, too. (laughter)

Dunaway: Yeah, exactly. It just amazes me to this day that there’s all this talk about New Orleans this, and New Orleans that. New Orleans didn’t even get hit by this hurricane. You know? They want something to carp about, wait till they catch one in the jaw like we did.

Hill: Well, you’ve spent some time in New Orleans?

Dunaway: Yes, sir.

Hill: Yeah, because I live in New Orleans.

Dunaway: Do you?

Hill: And I know what your beef is because y’all’s homes got blown away, but we have a hundred and twenty-thousand homes that aren’t livable. That’s a lot of people.

Dunaway: Yeah, well, we have sixty-eight thousand on the Coast here that are gone.

Hill: Yeah, I know; I know.

Dunaway: But we were laughing after the storm at these people sitting up on the roofs going, “Oh, gee whiz, it must be nice to have a roof to sit on.” (laughter)

Hill: Yeah.

Scull-DeArmey: (laughter) I don’t know.

Dunaway: Making fun of people’s misery, and I know that that water stayed in New Orleans, which was something we didn’t have to deal with.

Hill: It’s a whole different thing.

Dunaway: Nobody would live in New Orleans if they would have been on the right-hand side of that storm.

Hill: Oh, no, I understand that. I understand that.

Dunaway: New Orleans has run in a lucky streak that goes back to 1862, so we were kind of expecting it, whenever it turned north, I was like, “Oh, my God, New Orleans is going to get nailed.” But it kept veering a little more to the right and really probably saved thousands of lives in New Orleans.

Scull-DeArmey: What’s sad to me is that all my life—I grew up in Gulfport.
Hill: I grew up in Mobile.

Scull-DeArmey: And all my life, people have talked about, “One of these days, Lake Ponchartrain is going to get lifted up by a hurricane and spilled into New Orleans.” And I can remember sitting with friends before Katrina hit, and they were saying, “One of these days, that could happen.” And I said, “It is going to happen; one of these days that is going to happen. Those levees over there are not adequate.”

Dunaway: I don’t think they ever will be.

Scull-DeArmey: Maybe not.

Hill: For that storm the levees were adequate, but the storm walls in the interior canals were not. They were brand-new corps of engineer projects that fell over.

Dunaway: Those were those concrete walls.

Hill: That’s not the levees of the lake; the levees of the lake were not breached.

Scull-DeArmey: Really?

Hill: I mean they were, say, on the east, but the core part of New Orleans was flooded by the canals.

Dunaway: By those veins that run deep downtown.

Scull-DeArmey: That’s news to me.

Hill: And we don’t see this as a natural disaster in New Orleans, what happened to us. Now, New Orleans East, that stuff, that was different. But we blame it on the government because that stuff fell over that shouldn’t have fallen over.

Dunaway: Right, if it would have been built right.

Hill: It’s not rocket science.

Dunaway: Right. Well, I watched a special on that, and they were talking about how the water come over the top and just ate away the back and behind it.

Hill: That’s not actually what happened.

Dunaway: Really?

Hill: It didn’t come over the top; it was about three feet from the top.
Dunaway: Really?

Hill: It fell over. (laughter) So.

Dunaway: Somebody—that’s a kickback, there. That money was going somewhere else besides building—

Hill: They just didn’t put the pilings in deep enough.

Scull-DeArmey: What a shame.

Dunaway: Gosh, I don’t know how you can live there. Any time a storm comes, man, you better get out of there.

Hill: Well, they’ve fixed that problem. They have put floodgates up now, massive floodgates at the mouth of all those canals. Of course, they haven’t gotten pumping capacity in place to get our water out of the city. But yeah. Oh, well, we left for this one. We didn’t stay in this one. I grew up on the Gulf Coast so—

Dunaway: Yeah, you knew.

Hill: I got up Sunday morning and saw the radar; getting out of here. But it did miss us; you’re right. (laughter) It missed us. (laughter)

Dunaway: Thank goodness.

Scull-DeArmey: Are we all crazy to live this close to the Gulf of Mexico?

Dunaway: I’ve thought about that, and I’ve heard people say that, and it doesn’t matter. If you move from here, you got to deal with tornadoes or earthquakes or volcanoes. It doesn’t matter where you live, something’s going to get you.

Hill: I do have a different perception of nature than I did. And I’ve been through other hurricanes, and I was living in Mobile when Camille hit here, and I’ve worked crews and all, but this one changed my—I was always in awe of nature, but now there’s a certain malevolence (laughter) to it, that I attribute to it. And I’m not as happy with nature as I was before Katrina.

Dunaway: Right. This is true.

Hill: But you can’t—there’s nowhere you can go. You can get hit by a lightning bolt if you’re living in Montana.

Dunaway: Yeah, or fires in California.
Scull-DeArmey: Some people believe, when it’s your time, (laughter) you’re going to get it.

Hill: I just look at how long it’s going to be before we’re healed. And that’s what’s so hard because it’s not in our lifetime. I was thinking of a way to describe it to friends in another part of the country, and it’s like you live in an area, and there’s always, you can’t go home again because your area changes, but things change slowly, and this is like fifty years worth of change for the worst in one day.

Dunaway: Exactly.

Hill: And so you’re just reeling around, and all these things you remember are all gone, and you start to get confused about, “Well, didn’t people used to live here? Or didn’t I used to do that?” And you start to see the ghosts. It’s like a James Lee Burke novel, where they inhabit in the street corners or inhabit in the places they used to be; they’re not going to be there anymore. They’re gone. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: Yes. I have said exactly that to friends that the Gulfport, the Coast, the Gulf Coast that I grew up on is gone, and I knew it would go; I just didn’t think it would be in my lifetime. I thought for the rest of my life, I’d be able to slip back down into that little patch of yesteryear.

Hill: Yeah. We thought Camille was enough. (laughter)

Dunaway: Yeah. Well, what’s weird, up until the day Katrina hit, people here still talked about Camille, and now, it’s just a footnote. I mean, whenever you have a hurricane come in that destroys thirteen monuments that were built to a hurricane, (laughter) you know you’ve been clobbered.

Scull-DeArmey: Right, yeah. Well, I was doing some research on the Internet on hurricanes, and back around, I think it was, like, the late 1700s or early 1800s, when most of the population here was on the eastern seaboard, something like twenty thousand people were killed in one hurricane that was off the Atlantic. It’s been happening a long time.

Dunaway: Yeah. It goes through cycles.

Scull-DeArmey: My fear is, when is the next Katrina? You know? Is it next summer? Is it before the end of November?

Hill: Boy! We dodged a bullet this year.

Dunaway: Yeah. We didn’t have anything came into the Gulf, did we?

Scull-DeArmey: Something was pushing them out; maybe El Nino.
Hill: Global cooling.

Dunaway: Could be.

Scull-DeArmey: (laughter) No.

Hill: Sounds perfectly logical.

Scull-DeArmey: I wish we did have global cooling. (laughter) I would like that better than the global warming that’s coming on.

Dunaway: I don’t know. I was stationed in upstate New York in the Army, and I’ll take global warming any day. (laughter) Because when you’re cold, it’s hard to get warm. If it’s hot out, you can find a shade tree to get under. (laughter) But if it’s just twenty below zero, there’s nothing you can do except shiver. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: I always say just the opposite. You can get warmer, but when you’re too hot, you can’t get cooler. Is there anything else that I didn’t ask you about, or we didn’t talk about that you want to put on the record?

Dunaway: Let’s see. Let me think about it for a minute.

Scull-DeArmey: And I’m just going to look at these and see if there’s anything that we obviously missed. Well, this is an interesting question. How did Katrina change the way you think about your community?

Dunaway: Well, I don’t know. The community’s not here anymore. So that’s a hard one to answer.

Scull-DeArmey: What was the community feeling like here before?

Dunaway: I’m really not—I work graveyards, and so I don’t spend a lot of time, you know. I’d go out and speak to the neighbors and ask them what’s going on and stuff like that, but I was never really close. It’s not like I was going over for cookouts on the weekends or anything for this specific area. I spend more time doing that sort of stuff over on Kensington, my mom and dad’s neighborhood over there, and like I said, they’re all a tight-knit group over there.

Scull-DeArmey: Did those people stay there? Or did anybody move away?

Dunaway: Let’s see. I believe that one of the two ninety-year-olds that we’ve been discussing has passed away. Several people—well, a lot of them have given up and moved. But just in that immediate vicinity, three or four houses on either side of my mom and dad, I think everybody’s rebuilding.

Scull-DeArmey: Rebuilding.
Dunaway: Um-hm.

Scull-DeArmey: What about here in your neighborhood?

Dunaway: In this neighborhood?

Scull-DeArmey: Did people leave? Are they staying?

Dunaway: No. Some of them, there are some old veterans on this street, and they hadn’t got two pennies to rub together, so I’m sure they’re not going anywhere. They’re in this trailer here and down here on the end. There was Vietnamese people living in the house next to me. I think they’re all living in that house across the street now, so I’m not sure what their plans are, if they’re planning on building. This is all their debris here. They had it stacked in my yard. They must have been watching me out the window because once I got done moving it all, the lady came up and apologized to me. (laughter) So I think she was hiding around the corner watching, “We’ll wait till he’s finished.” (laughter) But I really don’t know who all’s going to stay and go. I’m going Monday to sign my papers to rebuild here. I’m just going to build a little thousand-square-foot house, ten feet up in the air.

Scull-DeArmey: What kind of papers do you have to sign to rebuild?

Dunaway: Oh, God! What papers don’t you have to sign? It’s a nightmare. The hurricane was nothing, but dealing with all these government agencies afterwards has been the horror of the hurricane. My parents are having a terrible time with the SBA [Small Business Administration]. They’ve been pretty good for me, but the Red Cross is worthless. I’ll never give them a nickel.

Scull-DeArmey: What happened?

Dunaway: Just every time that I’ve ever had any dealings with them, nothing got accomplished. I went and saw them fifteen times trying to get my little two-hundred-dollar card, so I could buy clothes and stuff with, and never got it and just got tired of dealing with them and said, “Forget it.” And FEMA, of course, everybody knows their story and all the problems they had.

Scull-DeArmey: How long did it take you to get your FEMA trailer?

Dunaway: Let’s see. It took about three months, about three and a half months.

Scull-DeArmey: Where did you live in the meantime?

Dunaway: Everywhere, (laughter) just moving around, one friend to the next. Once we left here for good, I loaded up my little SUV there. I got a friend of mine; my cousin’s got a friend in Hattiesburg, [Mississippi] that sells cars. So I went out and
bought that; that was the best thing he had. And I loaded it up with whatever little stuff I had, and I went camping. I went camping all across the United States—
(laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: That sounds like fun.

Dunaway: For about three months. I went and hit all the sites, the Grand Tetons and Yosemite, and Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon and slept on the beach in California and Oregon and just had me a good, old time.

Scull-DeArmey: Well, that’s great; what a good idea.

Dunaway: Yeah. It was nice.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. Did you find it helpful after what you’d—

Dunaway: Absolutely. Absolutely, yeah. After something like that, you’re trying to pick up the pieces of your life, and it takes a lot of time to sit down and analyze where you’re at, and where you’re going, and what your options are. And I mean, it was extremely difficult for me to even make the decision to come back.

Scull-DeArmey: What brought you back? Why did you decide to come back?

Dunaway: Well, before I moved here ten years ago; I’ve lived here for about ten years, and before that, being in the Army and being an Army brat, too, I’d lived in thirteen different states, and I like it right here in Biloxi. It’s the nicest place I’ve been. The people are nice; the weather’s nice. We got good fishing and great food, and so I decided to move down here. And then once I left, I traveled all around the country and realized that every place I went to was a reminder of why I like it here. (laughter) So eventually I wandered back, and plus I got a good job over there at the Beau Rivage. And you start a new job, and it’s like you have to work for five years before you can get a week of vacation. Well, I got three weeks of vacation here. It’s not much, but it’s little things like that that start amounting to big things. And of course, I didn’t want to feel like that I had been running off. I don’t like losing fights, and I felt like leaving Biloxi was losing a fight. There’s work to be done here, and come back, and of course my mom and dad live here, and they’re not getting any younger. So I like to be close enough to where I can look after them when I need to. So those are all important decisions, factors that went into the decision I made to come back. But I’m glad I did; I still like it here. Some of my friends are still around, so we’ll come back.

Scull-DeArmey: You’re lucky that way; not everybody can say that.

Dunaway: Right.
Scull-DeArmey: Are there any specific experiences that come to your mind when you think about dealing with local, state, federal officials?

Dunaway: Rick, the guy I was talking about that rented the other half, because he was a renter and he didn’t have renter’s insurance, I don’t know if he got five hundred dollars from all the relief agencies. Him and all of us, really, you’d go to an agency, and they’d say, “Can you show me the title on your house?” (laughter) It’s like, “It’s in the house.” (laughter) “Where’s the house?” “Gulf of Mexico. You want to go help me find it?” And demanding all these ridiculous—I mean, it’s not ridiculous, I guess. I know they need verification, but I mean, if they know who you are, take your fingerprint or whatever they need to do, but just to sit there and ask for this paperwork, that paperwork, this paperwork, that paperwork, I mean, it’s impossible for anybody to comply with.

Scull-DeArmey: In this situation.

Dunaway: Yeah. And of course, the insurance companies. Man, I had sixty-three thousand dollars worth of personal contents coverage with Allstate, and they didn’t give me a penny.

Scull-DeArmey: Why not?

Dunaway: They said, “Well, that’s flood damage. And you have to have personal contents coverage under your flood policy.” And I said, “Well, you didn’t tell me that whenever I was buying the insurance.” I said, “This is my first house that I owned.” And so I know now! But I’ll never forgive them for that. And the wind people, this game that the wind versus the water plays is, it’s bullshit. For the wind to push a twenty-foot wave in here, and then for them to say, “Well, that was water damage, not wind damage,” is just crazy. That’s like your house burns down, and the guy goes in and says, “This isn’t fire damage; it’s smoke damage.”

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. It’s clearly a way to get out of paying.

Dunaway: Yeah.

Hill: Have you gotten to the point in, you’re going to rebuild with a house that’s up ten feet. Have you questioned your homeowner’s insurance people about whether they’re going to be able to cover you? In New Orleans we’re starting to hear people who are building to where FEMA says they need to be, and then the homeowner’s insurance agencies are saying, “If your house is over four feet, we’re not going to cover you. If you raise it over four feet, we’re not covering you.”

Dunaway: Really?

Hill: So ask some questions. (laughter)
Dunaway: Well, I sure did. I told them; I was very specific about, “Yeah, it’s going to be elevated ten feet.” And they seemed to think that that was a good thing.

Hill: Well, we all thought so, too, but some people—

Dunaway: Well, why won’t they insure them if they’re elevated?

Hill: Well, they just say, “liability.” That’s their answer.

Dunaway: Yeah, a cop-out.

Hill: Yeah. And so people are having to go to the state insurers of last resort to get homeowner’s. They’re losing their policy because they’re building higher.

Dunaway: Wow, that’s amazing.

Scull-DeArmey: What a double-bind.

Hill: No kidding. I know. (laughter)

Dunaway: That’s definitely double jeopardy, and that’s you’re damned if you do, and if you don’t.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah.

Dunaway: Amazing.

Scull-DeArmey: Nothing more frustrating.

Dunaway: Right. But the bureaucratic mess was just an absolute nightmare. You fill out thirty pages of documents to FEMA; you mail them off. They call you back; say they never got them. They mail you some more, and you fill them out, and you mail them in. They get them, and then they call you up, wanting you to verify everything that you wrote on there with documentation. Of course, you don’t have any. So it was a nightmare.

Scull-DeArmey: Are you able to duke it out and get to the end of it, or are you still in the middle of it? Have you given up?

Dunaway: I’ve given up on most of it. I think FEMA gave me—there was two different checks; I think it came to, like, twenty-seven hundred dollars, and I used that to buy clothes and gas money to get out of here and stuff and get to Seattle. And there were several other things that you were supposed to be able to apply for, but I didn’t. It’s ironic that the people who did all the right things, who went and got all the right paperwork and had the insurance and all that sort of stuff, we’re left out in the wind with my neighbor over here, who didn’t have anything, he’s getting people throwing
money at him, left and right, from these different agencies. And I mean, I don’t want a handout; I certainly don’t want a handout, but whatever system they have is not working. It should be equitable, for crying out loud. (laughter)

Hill: What about the Congressional money? Have y’all started getting that yet?

Dunaway: No, there was—A.J. Holloway, our mayor here, was saying yesterday that that money is just now starting to come in, and so now it’s going to be tied up in committee for the next two years, which is exactly why I’m rebuilding. The City’s saying everything east of Oak Street over here has been rezoned for multidiwelling housing and gaming.

Scull-DeArmey: Are you east of Oak?

Dunaway: Um-hm. Oak’s that main street you came on. And so everybody’s talking about, “Oh, yeah, your real estate’s value is skyrocketing.” But I know that the reality of it is is it’s going to take years before they ever get around to rezoning this area for that. I thought it was funny that three days after the storm, every bumper in the state of Mississippi had a “We will rebuild together” bumper sticker on it, but nobody’s got permission to rebuild. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: Um-hm. I forgot what I was going to ask you. Your parents mentioned something about a casino wanting to buy your property because they wanted to build a casino here?

Dunaway: Well, no, that’s not accurate. Nobody’s actually approached me, but I’m real—what’s the word I’m looking for? I’ve grown up in Missouri. “Show me,” is the state motto, so I don’t believe it unless I see it. So idol talk doesn’t do anything for me. I’ll believe it whenever a guy shows up with a great, big checkbook. But the City came out with their development plans, and they had an artist schematic of how they want Biloxi to look twenty years from now. And they got about—as far as I could tell—about a twelve-story building sitting right here. (laughter) So I’m kind of happy about that.

Hill: With a little courtyard with your lot. (laughter)

Dunaway: Right, right. (laughter) My little house up on stilts looks like a mailbox. (laughter)

Scull-DeArmey: Do you feel like you’re reconnecting here?

Dunaway: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Getting to go back to work helped the most and getting to talk to all my friends and stuff and a lot of shared experiences, and everybody’s got their wild story. So it’s been nice.

Scull-DeArmey: Yeah. What are your plans for the future?
Dunaway: Well, hopefully one day I’ll sell to a casino. (laughter) And then I might be out of here; and then I might just have to change locations. I’ll have to buy me a farm somewhere.

Scull-DeArmey: Is that a dream you’ve had for a while, being on a farm?

Dunaway: Oh, yeah. Um-hm.

Scull-DeArmey: To sell food, or raise horses?

Dunaway: No, just to get back to my survival roots. I want to be able to raise my own food and generate my own power, and you got to have land to do that, of course. But that’s always been a dream of mine to show people that, “Look. You don’t need to be connected to the power company or the gas company and all that because it just goes up every year, and you’re never getting your money’s worth out of them.”

Scull-DeArmey: Get off the grid.

Dunaway: Yeah, get off the grid; that’s my goal.

Scull-DeArmey: How long did it take for Beau Rivage to open its doors and need its employees back?

Dunaway: Let’s see. I started back to work for them in June, and they opened on the anniversary of Katrina. So it was exactly one year to rebuild everything. And they had extensive damage.

Scull-DeArmey: Can you describe that somewhat?

Dunaway: Their entire power plant, their chillers. They have diesel engines in there that are as big as this FEMA trailer; they have four of them, and those were all destroyed. And those are all things that you have to carry out, and not only do you have to carry them out, but you have to rewire everything, too. The whole building had to be rewired. If you went underneath the casino, it’s up on metal girders, and there’s like a submarine under the water that they continually inflate and deflate to keep the casino level with the building as the tide goes up and down. And underneath that is the whole gaming floor, all the restaurants, and everything like that, all their pipes, all their drainage, all their electrical ran underneath that building, and we had trees coming off of Deer Island get up under there, and it was all just a big, tangled mess. They had to go in there with cutting torches and just cut out little chunks at a time and throw it out and carry it off until they could get in there to rebuild it all. Of course they’re still rebuilding all the restaurants, but we got the gaming floor open. In the high-rise, I think they only had, like, five or six windows got knocked out of the high-rise, so the damage on the hotel part was pretty minimal.
Scull-DeArmey: Wow. In an ideal world, how would you like to see this community rebuilt?

Dunaway: I’d really like to see something futuristic. You know? I mean, the great thing about the hurricane is that now you got a clean slate to start with. You don’t have to worry about the old infrastructure, and the old this, and you know. They have an opportunity, Biloxi does. In twenty years, this could be the most modern city on the face of the planet. And I think it’s just a fabulous opportunity, and with the revenue that they’re getting from the gaming industry, they have the money to do it. They just need to do it right, and something I’ve always dreamed about is a monorail system. I got to ride a monorail when I was in Sydney, and I just think that’s an awesome idea for Biloxi. If you had a monorail that was elevated twenty, twenty-five feet off the ground, that ran all around the peninsula and points between, if you take your actual car and drive it to the furthest point north that you can and put it inside of a secure building, the next hurricane that hits, you could use that dadgum monorail to deliver food and supplies and water to everybody that’s left, not to mention evacuating people. I think they have just a fabulous opportunity to really make this a nice, modern city and to make it something like out of Buck Rogers. I mean, we have the technology now, and they got the money and a clean slate. But we’ll see how it works out.

Scull-DeArmey: When you think about rebuilding this area, are there any issues that come to your mind that are going to be problems, obstacles, good things?

Dunaway: Well, a lot of the same old problems. I mean, it’s hard to have a road on the ground this low just because there’s moisture underneath the roads all the time, so you’re constantly battling potholes, and I don’t know why they don’t build the roads out of concrete. I know that’s probably a lot more expensive to use rebar concrete, but the asphalt just doesn’t work. So that’s a problem, and of course sewage. It has to be underground, so then you’re fighting the groundwater with that as well. So they got some real problems, but like I said, the technology’s there. It’s just if the money’s available and if the city council will authorize it, that dramatic of steps to rebuild the infrastructure.

Scull-DeArmey: This is a big question. Of course, you’re in charge; answer it however you want to, but how did Hurricane Katrina change you?

Dunaway: Let’s see. Well, primarily it just made me think more about family and what’s really important in life. This society is so wrapped around the materialism, sometimes a good jolt like that will really—the day after the hurricane, the leaves are always greener, and the sky is always prettier, and I think most of that is psychological, not meteorological. It just really puts into focus about what your long-term goals are, where you want to be, how do you want to achieve those ends. And a little motivation to try and make those happen faster.
Scull-DeArmey:  Yeah, um-hm.  Well, is there anything that I’ve not asked you that you’d like to record here for posterity?

Dunaway:  Let me do my rendition of—(laughter)  No.  That’s all I can think of.

Scull-DeArmey:  OK.  Well, thank you so much.

Dunaway:  OK.  Thank you.

(end of interview)