Biography

Mr. John Dubuisson was born July 8, 1950, in Gulfport, Mississippi. His father was Mr. Felecian Dubuisson (born June 2, 1915, in DeLisle, Mississippi), and his mother was Mrs. Etta Cuevas Dubuisson (born August 1, 1922, in Gulfport, Mississippi). Dubuisson grew up in Pass Christian, Mississippi, attending Pass Christian High School, from which he was graduated in 1969. In 1970, he was sent to Vietnam where he served in the US Army. In 1972, Dubuisson left the Army and attended the Mississippi Law Enforcement Officers Training Academy to become a police officer. He was graduated in 1975. He has been working in the law enforcement profession since then, starting as a patrolman, serving in investigations and as a canine officer, and finally becoming chief of police, which was his position at the time of this interview.

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

JOHN DUBUISSON

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Project. The interview is with John Dubuisson and is taking place on February 19, 2009. The interviewers are Claire Gemmill and Jocelyn Wattam.

Gemmill: OK. So this is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project, done in conjunction with The University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Chief Dubuisson. Is that how you—

Dubuisson: Dubuisson, yeah, that’s close. Canadian French. (laughter)

Gemmill: And is taking place on February, 19, 2009, in Long Beach, Mississippi. The interviewers are Claire Gemmill—

Wattam: —and Jocelyn Wattam.

Gemmill: I am Claire, and I will begin with the first question. First of all, I’d like to thank you, Chief Dubuisson, for taking time with us today, and I would like to get some background information about you, which is what we usually do in our oral history interviews. So I’m going to ask you for the record, could you state your name, please?

Dubuisson: John Dubuisson.

Gemmill: And for the record, how do you spell that, John?

Dubuisson: J-O-H-N, D-U-B-U-I-S-S-O-N.

Gemmill: Thank you. And where were you born?

Dubuisson: Gulfport, Mississippi.

Gemmill: And when were you born?

Dubuisson: July 8, 1950.

Gemmill: And for the record, what was your father’s name, and how do you spell it?

Gemmill: And your mother’s first name and maiden name and spelling, please.


Gemmill: Thank you.

Wattam: So could you tell us a little about where you grew up and your childhood?

Dubuisson: Grew up in Pass Christian; went to Pass Christian High School; played sports at Pass Christian School System all the way through; graduated in 1969. After that, I went to Vietnam in 1970, I believe it was. Got out of the Army January 26, 1972, I believe it was, somewhere around there. After that went to the Mississippi Law Enforcement Officers Training Academy to become a police officer. I think it was in 1975, and been working in the profession ever since. Started as a patrolman, worked my way up to chief after a stint in investigations and canine officer.

Wattam: And could you tell us a little bit more about your educational background?

Dubuisson: High school, that’s it, and then training academies and various academies put on by the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and things like that.

Gemmill: And could you tell us a little bit about your job that you’re in currently?

Dubuisson: Currently I serve as chief of police of a department of about twenty-six personnel, total, twenty-one sworn law enforcement officers. That ranges from patrolmen, investigators, assistant chief, and myself. And we see that the laws and ordinances are enforced on a daily basis, plus we provide training for the officers and so on.

Wattam: OK. So how many generations of your family have lived on the Gulf Coast?

Dubuisson: Oh, that’s a good question. I don’t know. (laughter) A bunch. It goes back quite a ways.

Wattam: And what was it like for you growing up on the Gulf Coast?

Dubuisson: It was good; life was good. Still is.

Wattam: Do you have any specific memories about what it would have been like here, growing up?
Dubuisson: Oh, just the beaches, fishing in the summertime, and the mild winters that we have. You can play football in a tee-shirt and shorts in November. I mean, you know, it doesn’t get cold enough to even wear long sleeves, most of the time.

Wattam: Sounds nice. (laughter)

Dubuisson: It is. (laughter) It is nice. (laughter)

Gemmill: Can you describe your attachment to the region? And what does it mean to you?

Dubuisson: Well, I was born and raised here. Let me see. I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. I’ve seen quite a bit of the world through travel with the Army and stuff, so I don’t think I’d want to live anywhere else.

Gemmill: Can you describe your neighborhood before Hurricane Katrina? Where was it, and what was it like?

Dubuisson: Pass Christian’s located on the west end of Harrison County between Long Beach and Bay St. Louis. Population prior to Katrina was about sixty-five hundred full-time, and we had, oh, summer-homes, people out of New Orleans and the surrounding area had. And I imagine it [swelled] to, populationwise, about seventy-five hundred or so in the summertime, seventy-five hundred to eight thousand, maybe. And it’s a bedroom community. We had a mayor that used to say, “Before someone could move in, someone had to die.” (laughter) So we’d have a free place for them to live. It’s the only community, actually, along the Coast that’s not overly industrious; there’s not a lot of industrial area in Pass Christian. We have one industrial area park, and it’s located in the northern section of the city and primarily deals with concrete, prestress concrete. So other than that, it’s a bedroom community.

Wattam: What would you say are your most vivid memories of the community before the hurricane?

Dubuisson: Probably that everyone in the city just about knew everybody. It was really quaint; I mean, just quiet. No major crime to speak of, I think maybe a murder every five to six years, and then everybody has their drug problems. We deal with drugs on a regular basis, but just nice, quiet, little town. Everybody wanted to live there.

Gemmill: It sounds wonderful.

Dubuisson: It was.

Gemmill: Before Hurricane Katrina, what were some types of traditions that carried on in your community? Any celebrations or music or art festivals that you guys had?
Dubuisson: (laughter) Yeah. We do those. (laughter) In fact, we’ve got one coming up this weekend, Sunday. Are y’all going to be in town?

Gemmill: No. We have to leave Saturday morning.

Dubuisson: Oh, you’re going to miss it.

Gemmill: I know. We’re disappointed.

Dubuisson: Mardi Gras parade in Pass Christian. That town on that day goes to—that’s probably the longest, oldest tradition for Pass Christian. It’ll go from—right now population’s about maybe four thousand since the hurricane. Sunday we’ll probably have anywhere from forty to fifty thousand people in that town.

Gemmill: Wow.

Dubuisson: And it is one big party. (laughter) It’s a party.

Wattam: What does the parade look like? Can you describe that a little bit?

Dubuisson: Did you get to see Long Beach’s last weekend.

Gemmill: No, we didn’t.

Dubuisson: OK. Are you familiar with Mardi Gras at all?

Wattam: Yeah. We actually did go to New Orleans and then down Bourbon Street, so we got a little bit.

Dubuisson: OK. All right. There you go. Take that and put it in Pass Christian, and (laughter) everybody’s got a float that enters. I think there’s going to be like sixty-seven floats this year. We had to limit the floats, the number of floats. It was getting out of hand. I think the most we had one year was something like 118, 119 floats, and it went on and on and on. And I thought it’d never end, (laughter) but it did eventually. So costumes, you have your costumers. You have a lot of drunks, a lot of drunks. And usually it’s pretty peaceful during the parade. After the parade is when the police officers that work the area, we catch the trouble after that.

Wattam: Busy night?

Dubuisson: Yeah, busy night, exactly. It’ll go on until probably—it all depends—usually eight, nine o’clock, but this year we have several restaurant and barroom-type areas that’s going to be open, so it could go on till eleven, twelve o’clock. You know, later. It’s a party, best way to describe it.
Gemmill: Can you explain some of the history and the meaning behind the Mardi Gras parade or the Mardi Gras festival, and the reason for the party, the celebration?

Dubuisson: Not really. I mean, I should be able to, but I know it’s put on in Pass Christian to help the St. Paul’s Catholic School. It’s called the St. Paul’s Catholic School Carnival Association. And there’s a lot of tradition behind it, and there are some people that could probably explain it to you in detail, but not me.

Wattam: Can you describe any of your community’s problems as well as strengths before the hurricane?

Dubuisson: Problems before the hurricane, primarily retaining public safety employees, and that was because of the tax base that we had prior to the hurricane. Like I said, we’re not an industrial area. Our taxes derive from ad valorem property taxes, and we do have some expensive property in Pass Christian because we have beachfront property, and if you live on the beach, you pay a good tax. And then we had just had a Wal-Mart open up in Pass Christian, I guess, I want to say about two years, three years prior to the hurricane, and they were contributing well over a million dollars in sales tax to the city, and that was a big help. It really, we could boost the salaries of the police officers, firemen, and public employees period. And that was going a long way, and then of course, along came Katrina and knocked that out. And Wal-Mart’s back, and they are rebuilding. So. And I’m hoping they’ll do better than they did before the hurricane because right now I’m in an employee-turnover situation. We are the lowest-paid police and fire department along the Coast. We hire people; we train them, and then different agencies in the area—and you can’t blame them because they’re looking for personnel, too—they offer a lot more money, and the guys, young guys got to go where the money’s at because they have families to raise. So you can’t blame them. And they do.

Wattam: Are there any of the strengths that you can think of, of your community before the hurricane?

Dubuisson: Well, in Pass Christian, everybody pulled together. If something happened, it was a tight-knit community, and I’d say that was probably the biggest strength was the city, the tightness of the city.

Gemmill: John, how has the storm changed the way that you think about your community?

Dubuisson: Appreciate the people in it more. There was a lot, you saw a lot—I lived through [Hurricane] Camille, too. And Camille was 1969; I was nineteen years old, just graduated from high school. And Camille compared to this one was a thunderstorm. I mean, everybody thought Camille was bad, and it was. I lost a home in both storms. Camille, I lost my home. I lost my home in this storm. I was nineteen then, and I had a different outlook on things, I mean, but I worked through that and saw the community at that time, which was even smaller, come together. Black,
white, didn’t matter. We all ate in the same place every morning for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, provided by the Red Cross. And this time after Katrina, it was the same thing. But I think what’s hurt the City this time, and it’s going to take a long time to recover is after Camille, you had buildings and structures left, especially on the beach, that people came back to and rebuilt. This time it’s like you take a pencil and eraser and just erased every home. It’s not there anymore; it’s just naked property. And a lot of people that lived on the beach were older people, retired people, and they don’t want to go through this again. So they have hit the road, and apparently they’re not coming back. So it’s going to take a while for this town to recover, but I think the strength of this whole deal is the tightness. The community has gotten a lot tighter, I think, as far as a group. I mean, right after the storm, and even now, when you had a council meeting and alderman’s meeting, I mean, the place was packed. And the same way now. People just still there and wanting to find out, just find out what they can do to help; try to start a new business, buy some property, something. So it’s going to come back. It’s just going to take a while.

Wattam: How did you hear about Hurricane Katrina?

Dubuisson: (laughter) How’d I hear about it? Monitored it on TV, radio. And I guess it was the night before, which would have been what? The fourth, we were working; there was thirteen of us working, and I’d called in a skeleton crew. Basically it was just a few people, enough to keep an eye on things. And we tried to get everybody out of town. And the fire department at the time, the chief was Richard Marvil. He was the fire chief, and he just retired a few days ago. And we had a plan, and just get everybody out of town because this thing was building. It was getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and nobody knew how big it was going to be, was the fact. So we had this plan in place that where city hall was located up on Scenic Drive, and then the library behind it, and then the court building behind that, that that’s where we were going to ride the storm out, in the library because it was high and safe ground. (laughter) So as all things go, you know, plans don’t work the way you start them out. It was about 2:30, I guess, in the morning. We’d been watching TV all night, and you could see on the TV screen that the hurricane was taking up the whole Gulf of Mexico. It was covered, just completely covered. And I had six officers that went to one officer’s home to get something to eat and relax a little bit. And I was sitting in my office, and the wind was blowing; the walls were shaking. And I hear one of my guys say, “Well, we can’t go this way.” Other one says, “Well, we can’t go that way.” I got on the radio, and I said, “What’s the problem?” Said, “Chief, we’re surrounded by water.” This is about 2:15 or so. I said, “What?” Said, “Yeah, Chief. We got water everywhere.” I said, “Water. OK.” I said, “Well, how far can you go?” He said, “Well, we can get to Barkley Avenue,” which is a street that ties into Everitt. I said, “OK. Y’all just get as far as you can.” We had three brand-new patrol cars, 2005 models. I think each one of them had less than five thousand miles on them, two guys to the car. So one of the sergeants, Lally was in the station, and I got the assistant chief Ruspoli up. He was in his office, also. I said, “Look, let’s go ahead and get everything moved up to the library. The guys are trapped with water already.” And he looked at me like I was crazy, which I said, “OK. Let’s start moving.” And
we walked outside, and the rain was just sideways; I mean, it was just straight at you like that. Wasn’t no down; it was just coming straight at you. It was blistering you. And we had two Army deuce-and-a-half, big, large trucks parked out front. So I jumped in one, cranked it up, pulled out in the street, and it died off, and it wouldn’t crank again. So Sergeant Lally had gotten the other one, and he cranked it up; he pushed us out of the roadway and left it on the side of the road. And we went to get the guys. Well, when we got to Church and Second Street—I know that you’re not familiar with these streets, but this is part of the program. (laughter) When we got to Church and Second Street, the water was about three and a half feet deep already, and it was running north from the Gulf out here, north up Church Street. So I looked at Lally, and I said, “We might not be able to go get these guys.” “No. We’ll go and get them.” So we went; went through some deeper water and came up on some shallow spots. And we got to them; turned around. Told them, said, “Y’all get in the cars. Get the cars; get them right up behind this truck. We’re going to push the water out of the way; you just follow us. You get right on our butt, and you stay there.” Worked fine (laughter); worked great. Went all the way back to Henderson Avenue, and we started down this one little gulley-like, little low spot in the road. And I looked behind us, and all three of the cars are just floating like corks. Boop, boop. I said, “Oh, crud.” So we got the guys out, out of the cars, got them in the back of the truck. We’re pulling off, and one of the officers, Craig Necaise, said, “Chief, what about those people in that vehicle back there by the Winn-Dixie?” I looked at Craig; I said, “People in a car by the Winn-Dixie?” He said, “Yes, sir. There’s some people in a car back there.” So I said, “All right.” Told Lally, I said, “Turn it around.” So we sent right back through the dip, and the cars had already just washed away; the police cars, just gone. That’s how strong the current was. So we went back through the dip, came back up on shallow ground, went around, and we looked out there. And what had happened was, there wasn’t anyone in the car, but the water had gotten into the car, and the lights came on; the flashers and everything was on. The saltwater had shorted everything out. So we left there and went back; went to the library, and we got all our other cars that was back at the police station because in Camille, where the police station was located was a grocery store. And in Camille they had about six feet of water in that store. In fact, the store had burned during the hurricane, and it burned down to the waterline. So we started moving everything, got everything up to the library, and there was thirteen of us at that time in the library. And the house directly across from the library was there during Camille, and the water rose to the front porch on that house, and then it receded and went back out. So at 6:30 we left the library, and we walked up to the city hall. I don’t know if you’re familiar. Have you been down to the west end where Pass Christian’s located at all?

Gemmill: I’m not sure. I don’t think so.

Dubuisson: OK. Well, we walked out of city hall and standing on the front porch of city hall, and we’re looking at the water in the Gulf. And I think city hall’s located on a bluff. I say a bluff; compared to the rest of the Coast, it’s a ridge. And it’s, I believe, the height is twenty-two feet, and at that time, 6:30 in the morning, the water was right up to the road that we know as Scenic Drive. So you’re looking at twenty-
two feet of water from down at sea level that had already rose that high. So we went back and got in the library, and we had all the cars parked, plus we had some civilians had parked their cars up there, citizens, for safety, that lived in the lower-lying area. We had all the cars parked there, and the water started rising and just kept on coming, coming, coming, and the water started coming around the library. So I told the guys, I said, “The water’s going to get at least as high as that porch over there on that house.” And I said, “We’re all right.” And they had Category-Three-storm glass. They had just retrofit the library, and it had storm glass in it, and it had narrow windows about so, and about ten feet tall, and doors, double-doors, glass, and they had did all that over. The water got up; it was probably about four feet on the outside of the building, and the cars were floating (laughter) away. One of my investigator’s cars we’d brought up there, it was like he was driving it. It went down Hearn Avenue, which is located on the east side of the library, and it looked like it was going about seventy miles an hour, straight down. The water just took it straight down. And we laughed because, said, “Damn! It looks like Stuart’s driving that car.” (laughter) And we started laughing about it. You know, you got to try to keep something. And we sat in there, looking around, and all the cars are going out. And a buddy of mine, one of the officers, Piazza, I believe it was, he was videoing all this from the inside of the library. And somebody had a little Volkswagen Rabbit car, and it was sitting on top of a pole, fencepost. One of them says, “Damn, Chief, there’s a rabbit on a post over here.” (laughter) So the assistant chief, he thought it was a real rabbit; he runs over there. He says, “What damn rabbit?” (laughter) “No rabbit over there!” So we had got, just hanging around there, and the water had just started seeping in under the door, and the carpet was just getting wet, but the water was like that [gesturing] deep on the outside, all the way around the building. Well, in fact, the way the building’s located, it was probably about six feet or seven in the back because the building, the land tilts down. So we sitting there, watching the cars disappear and go out, watching the houses disappear. And everything’s disappearing. City hall’s still there. We’re still here. “Good!” And we keep watching them, watching them, watching them. One car left in the parking lot, and it was directly south of the library, right directly in front of those two glass double doors; I mean, right there. And it’s like that car had eyes. I mean, it just all of a sudden, the rear end’s up in the air, and the blue lights are flashing. All the emergency flashers are on, and it’s just bumping along, bump, bump, bump. Here’s these nice double doors (laughter), and we’d already talked about this. Thank God we had a plan. But here we go again. We make a plan, and the plan don’t always work. All right. And I told the guys, I said, “Listen, if for some reason one of these doors give, whether it’s the back or the front, we got to turn around and shoot out the other one, because if we don’t, we’re going to all drown in this building because the water’s going to come rushing in. It’s going to fill this. It’s going to trap us.” So wouldn’t you know? Last car in the parking lot, just bouncing along, tail-end up in the air? We were sitting there, and there was four or five of us standing at the door, looking at it. “Surely it’s going to turn and go like the other ones.” I mean, we’d seen one car go on the east side of the building, and the other twelve or fifteen plus the citizens’ cars go to the west side of the building. I’m telling you, it was a magnet on that car. It came straight to those double doors, crashed in the doors; water came running in. Everybody ran, started jumping up on something high. The guys
turned around, and I’m standing in between them; I’m holding onto the desk. And they up on the desk, and they shot twenty, probably about twenty or twenty-two rounds into those back doors. Nothing happened. I mean, it just looked like those bullets hit, and splattered. We’re talking about forty-fives here, and that is some tough glass. And they hit it just about every time; I think maybe one or two hit the frame, and that’s it. So the water’s just steady coming in. I mean, it’s just coming in quick, quick, quick, just rolling in. And so I said, “Shit! If we don’t do something, we’re all going to drown here.” So all the computer equipment that was on the tables in the library and a lot of the library tables had washed toward those doors. So I said, “Well, it’s one choice. Somebody’s got to go over there and open the door.” So I went over there; I opened the door. And you know, I fish out here a lot; strong tides, you stand in the water, and you can lean back against the water. When I got over there, I hit the trip on the doors; the door with just a regular bar across it, hit it, and I called myself holding onto the other side. (laughter) When I hit that door, I went phew, out the door. And for some reason, prior to opening that door, I stood there, and I thought, said, “OK. You got to have a little plan, another plan.” There’s a handicap rail directly behind that door. It’s about ten or twelve feet, I guess. The back porch on the library was about ten or twelve feet wide. I said, “OK. You get to the rail and grab the rail when you go by if you go out the door.” And then I said, “If that don’t work, there’s an oak tree about twenty-five yards past that. You got to swim to that oak tree.” Well, like I said, I wasn’t planning on leaving the building, but when I opened that single door, out the door I went. And I didn’t have to worry about grabbing the rail because it grabbed me. I hit that rail, and I thought I just broke my hip. And I said, “Oh, crap.” And the water’s just steady rolling over the top of me; I’m covered in water about three feet. And believe it or not, you can hear underwater because I could hear everybody in the building screaming, “Chief, Chief, Chief!” And (laughter) I said, “Hmm.” I said, “Let this water get over the top of me, please.” And so I managed to step up on one rail and hold onto the other one, and I got my head above the water. And then the water, it levelized in the building, and when it wound up, it was about three feet or so, deep enough that we could manage to get everybody out of the building. And we did, and one of the guys, name is Piazza, Anthony Piazza, he found an extension cord, a telephone line, and we pulled across on that line and got up on top of the roof, and we waited it out then until it was over with and got down that afternoon. And it was about three nights later, I guess; I was on top of the fire truck, trying to sleep on the hose rack. And I’m laying there, and I’m thinking. I said, “Hmph. What the hell happened to that car? Where did that car go?” I want you to know; the car didn’t come in the building, and I guess that’s a miracle, because I don’t know what held it out because it busted in both the doors, but the car went around the building like it should have done in the first place. Because if it would have came through the building and jammed up against the other door, we’d have been cooked. We’d have never got out of that building. So that’s my big story.

**Gemmill:** It was the water that broke through the windows then?

**Dubuisson:** Well, the windows didn’t break. The water just came through the front doors, the double doors that was open. The windows never did break. And if the car
hadn’t have hit that door, we would have stayed in that library, dry. I don’t know; it’s weird the way things work.

**Wattam:** It is. How many of you were in there?

**Dubuisson:** It was thirteen of us, and a Chihuahua. And we lost the Chihuahua. The Chihuahua was my dispatcher’s little dog, Paco, and she had him in a cage, and she handed it to me in the cage, and a wave just knocked it right out of my hands, and I tried to get back to it, but it was gone. But if that door wouldn’t have opened, or it had got jammed up, we’d have been—and the good thing about this hurricane, if there’s anything good about it, it happened during the daylight hours, because had it been pitch-black in that library at night, like most hurricanes do hit at night, and not just in the library, but all over town, there would have been a heck of a lot more people lost their lives, because you wouldn’t have been able to see what to do. As it was, we could see. We could see what was happening, and we could manage to do something to save ourselves. But if it had have been dark, none of us would probably have made it out of there because we wouldn’t have been able to find our way out of there. So experience; don’t want to experience another one.

**Gemmill:** So can you tell us what you did after the evacuation? Where did you stay? Did you have to move?

**Dubuisson:** As far as the police department?

**Gemmill:** Well, what had happened to your house and your personal—

**Dubuisson:** Oh, I lost everything in the storm. My house, well, I had some house left, but it was all washed off the foundation, all busted up and everything. I managed to salvage some of the stuff out of it, not much, but some. My son spent the next school year, which would have been his seventh-grade or eighth-grade year, with his grandparents in Jennings, Louisiana. My wife works for the Hancock Bank here on the Gulf Coast. We stayed in a condo in Diamondhead. We managed to find a place to stay in Diamondhead, which is in Hancock County next to [Interstate]-10, for, I guess it was probably about a year or so. I got very lucky in finding a friend of mine who built me a new house. He was a contractor, and people were looking to find contractors. And just so happened he was a personal friend, and he took care of me. He got my house back up. I was out maybe a little over a year and got a new home built. So.

**Wattam:** And where was your family during the time of the storm? Had they evacuated?

**Dubuisson:** Yeah. They had evacuated. They, my wife and son went to stay with her brother who lives in Woolmarket, which is north of the interstate behind Gulfport, in that area, and Biloxi. They were safe; I wasn’t worried about them. I think it was three days or four days after the storm before I got to see my wife. I think it was about
four, yeah, four days before I got a way to get out of town to go see her. And (laughter) she has a little story that she told, and she tells, that she doesn’t know. She says her guardian angel was looking after her. My sister lives in Lizana, which is a rural area north of here, and of course we were totally blacked out. The Coast was just no lights, no power nowhere from here to Hattiesburg, I guess, pretty much, no power. And it was the day, the night after the storm. She didn’t know whether I was dead or alive or whatever. Nobody did. In fact everybody thought we were dead, and rumor had got out. I think CNN [Cable News Network], one of the broadcasts, news broadcast systems, pronounced that the police chief, the fire chief, and the mayor had died in the library in Pass Christian. But there’s a funny; I’ll tell you that one after this one. But my wife and my son tried to make it from her brother’s house to my sister’s house. Well, my wife’s good about directions. She knows how to find her way around, but being totally dark at night, no street lights, nothing, she couldn’t. She was kind of maneuvering blind. She came down I-10; went down I-10 west and got off on this one road she thought she was familiar with. She didn’t know where she was at. So she said she came up to this one little gas station I guess it was, that was running off of a generator. They did have some electricity and lights there, and there wasn’t anybody there to tell her how to get to where she wanted to go. So she started following this one car and had no idea where that one car was going, and she followed that car, and just so happens (laughter) that car was going basically in the same direction she was going. She wound up, after she found a road she recognized, she managed to get to where she was going. But about the part everybody thinking we were dead, the fire chief at that time, Richard Marvil, his father lives in Florida. And he called his dad, got a hold of a phone and called his dad, and his dad answered the phone. And he said, “Hey, Dad.” And his dad said, “Who is this?” He said, “It’s Rich.” He said, “Don’t be shitting with me, son. My son’s dead. He died in Pass Christian.” He said, “Goddamn, Daddy, it’s me. You don’t recognize your own son?” He said, “Well, if you’re my son, tell me where you was born at.” And he’s originally from Pennsylvania. And at that point Rich proceeded to tell him the street and all that stuff. And he was, “Well, damn. You’re not dead.” (laughter) He said, “I been trying to tell you that.” So that was the funny part of the whole deal, I guess. But yeah, it was an experience.

**Wattam:** So where did you stay for the year before your home was rebuilt?

**Dubuisson:** In the condo at Diamondhead, an apartment up in Diamondhead is what it was.

**Wattam:** And where did you end up rebuilding your home? Was it in the same location, or did you—

**Dubuisson:** Um-hm, yeah. No. I rebuilt in the same location.

**Wattam:** You stayed.
Dubuisson: Believe me. If I’d have had enough money to move further north to get away from the—one I’d have probably moved because like I said, I’ve been through this twice, lost homes in both of them and everything I had. I really don’t want to do it again, but the way the insurance companies are working, I was one of the fortunate ones, I guess, when it comes to insurance because, like I said, I did have some home remaining, and even though it was washed off its pillars and almost on top of my neighbor’s house, there was a big hole right through the center of the top of it, and the little adjustor that looked at it said, “Damn. Looks like a tornado hit it to me.” I said, “Yeah, it did.” (laughter) And I did get the payoff on my insurance, the wind coverage and everything, but the thing about it is, at today’s rates and prices, there wasn’t enough money to just replace the house. We wound up having to get an SBA [Small Business Administration] loan to pay it off and to rebuild completely. So but you talk about shocking. When we got out of the library that afternoon, it was just about right before dark, I guess, when we walked out of there. And all the firemen, they stayed at their station on the east end of town. And they had, I think they had about four and a half feet of water in that fire station. And that fire station was a lot higher than where we were at. And I mean, everybody just figured we were dead. I mean, that’s the way they were figuring it. “We’re going down there, and we’re going to recover them.” So before Father Dennis, who was the Catholic priest in the city, left, he gave me the keys to St. Paul’s School, which was directly across from our old, where the police department was located. Well, the police department wound up with about twenty feet of water on top of it, so we made the right move at the right time, which we knew we were doing. We figured we were going to a lot safer area than we were at, but so when we got out that evening, we started looking for people that might still be alive in the area, and we knew that one man had died right half a block away from us. We knew. He was the first, probably, the first casualty of the storm. And we got his wife; she had a broke hip, I believe, a broken hip. And I’m thinking there was another person in the house with them, and they came with us. We managed to get, finally we managed to get a rescue unit to take her to a hospital to get her out of there, but she spent I guess four or five hours with us in pain. I mean, she was—well, what we did, I had the keys to the school, and we got on the second floor, and we opened up one of the classrooms, a couple of classrooms, and that’s where we spent the first night, just about it, right there. And you could get up on top of the school, and I walked to the top of the school on the second floor and looked around, and I could see where my mother’s house was. I could see where my house was; there wasn’t nothing too much left nowhere around. It was bad.

Gemmill: Could you explain or kind of describe the community after the hurricane and what the sense was that you got and what the people there were doing?

Dubuisson: Well, right after the hurricane, I’m saying a few days afterwards, the people that were there, shock, disbelief, despair. “Where do we go from here? Who’s running the show?” They were looking for some leadership. “Show us what’s going to happen next.” And at that point, we working out of a little, bitty, we called it a horse trailer; the police department was. All the sewer and the water and all that was down. Everything was down. Everybody was worried about disease, and we had to
get the water up and running first and get the sewerage system back working because on the east end of town, which is closest to Long Beach here, we did have some homes—you know what I mean. There was homes that needed services. So the city fathers, in their wisdom, which they did a good job after the storm, did get those services back in place as quick as they could. In fact I stayed with a buddy of mine right after the storm; I guess it was about two weeks after the storm. We stayed with him for probably about six or eight weeks and lived with him right there. And I don’t think we got any sleep for about ten weeks. I mean, we were just steady going, one thing after the other. Meetings, meetings and trying to get the City back to some sort of functionality, which you couldn’t move because the streets were all just debris in the streets, flat tires. I mean, you roll down the street in a car, you (laughter) had a dozen nails in one tire. I mean, it was just unbelievable, but eventually—I guess it took maybe three or four days—we got a crew in here, and they went down through each street, and they moved some houses off of the streets, and there’s probably going to be some lawsuits behind that. (laughter) People got their houses pushed out of the street, and they wound up in the street, and they weren’t too happy about that, and I guess I could see their point. But we had to be able to get around, and it was just a total mess.

**Wattam:** Had most of the town evacuated?

**Dubuisson:** Pretty much. There were some fools that stayed, and I mean, nobody realized how big this thing was going to be and how bad. And I’m trying to remember how many people that we actually lost in Pass Christian. I want to say it was somewhere around nineteen, maybe. I think it was nineteen. And I believe we still have one that’s unidentified, as far as casualties. But like I said, if this thing happened at night, it would have been worse because people had the opportunity to be able to see to maneuver, get out of the house and get up on the roof, get in a tree or something. But had it been dark, you wouldn’t have been able to do that. In fact, the people that we did lose, most of them went up in their attic area, and got trapped because of rising water, and drowned in their attic. But we were lucky, though, nineteen, not bad.

**Gemmill:** John, what was it like to get basic necessities like food and water? I know the ATMs [automatic teller machines] were down, and cash was an issue at the time.

**Dubuisson:** ATMs were scattered all over. (laughter)

**Wattam:** Literally down. (laughter)

**Dubuisson:** In fact, the banks in the city, which we had two at the time, they recovered those ATMs the very next day, I believe. They were down here looking for those ATMs. And they found them. I don’t know how. They’ve got to have a locater in those ATMs. That’s all I can figure, because they went straight to them, and I can’t believe what they did. They found them. In fact, laundering money? Like I said, my wife works for the Hancock Bank, and she worked from, the day after the storm she
reported to work; she kept working right on through it. They literally took the money from the banks, washed it in washing machines, and dried it and ironed it. That’s what you call laundering money. (laughter) But they did. I mean, I’d go in the afternoon sometime and pick her up, and they had stacks of money just laying all over the floor, air-drying.

Gemmill: Right. We heard that, too.

Dubuisson: Yeah. They did.

Gemmill: So medicines and water?

Dubuisson: Oh, you were talking about basics, basics.

Gemmill: Yeah.

Dubuisson: Everybody’s down at FEMA, and everybody said FEMA didn’t do a good job.

Gemmill: Could you, sorry, for the record, clarify what FEMA is, please?

Dubuisson: Federal Emergency Management Agency. But I’m here to tell you, I think they did an excellent job. Under the circumstances, I think they did a good job. Food and water, we got in, I’d say a couple days after the storm. We started getting supplies of water and food. It was coming in from every different direction you could possibly imagine. We had some people here, running down the streets with a needle in each hand, giving you shots, tetanus shots and blah, blah, blah. And they were hitting you left and right. And I think I got two or three in one day, and I said, “Wait a minute; I just had one.” “I’m giving you another one. Pkew!” (laughter) So I shouldn’t need a tetanus shot for the rest of my life, but the biggest problem was sanitation. And we managed to get in quite a few Porta-lets [portable toilets] eventually. I mean, that took a while, but we finally did get those in and put up some coldwater showers and stuff like that to take a bath. In fact, when I did manage to get away from Pass Christian, I took a bath in my sister’s swimming pool, and that was about a week after, I guess. I just went, and dove in their pool, and said, “Give me some soap!” (laughter) But I had two dogs that if they could sit here and tell you a story, they’d have a story to tell you. They rode that hurricane out; how they made it, I don’t know. Two bird dogs, I didn’t think I’d see them alive, again. But I guess it was three days after the storm, I managed to get back to my home. I said, “What!!?” But one of them, look, it took me almost an hour to catch that dog. He was in shock, serious shock. I mean, I’d call him; he’d turn around and go the other way. I guess he said, “You no good SOB; you left us here to drown.” (laughter) But he survived; he lived through it. But I’m telling you; they could tell you a story.

Wattam: Were they in the house?
Dubuisson: No. They were out in their yards, and I have, the large yard around the house was fenced in, and I had them in kennels. So when I left, I opened the gates and let them have the run of the large yard, in case something did happen, where they could fend for themselves. And we had three little dachshunds, and I don’t know why I didn’t take the big ones with me and take them up to my sister’s, but I didn’t. But I took the three little dachshunds up there because I [thought], “They won’t make it.” And I left the big ones, and my wife asked me after, she said, “Why didn’t you take the big ones, too?” I said, “Well, I don’t know. Don’t ask me.” But I think the services after were as good as they could provide as quick as they could get them. And everybody keeps downing FEMA, and I think they did a great job. And we had an agency that came out of Florida, and I can’t remember the name of it. But it was a police department out of Dade County, I think it was, and it was their disaster response team that set up out at the Harrison County Sheriff’s Office, out by the jail. And they basically took over as far as recovery after the storm, dealing with law enforcement and getting supplies in for police departments, like cars and equipment and stuff like that. They organized and took care of all that, and they need a big pat on the back, because they really did a great job. But I mean, with as many hurricanes as they had or have in that area, they knew what they were doing. And they said, though, when they got over here, they said, “Let me tell you something. We had Andrew and all the major hurricanes that hit Florida. We’ve never seen anything as bad as this.” And there’s one other thing about New Orleans. That levee hadn’t have broke, you wouldn’t even have heard about New Orleans. You would have never heard a word about that city. I mean, I feel sorry for them, but all the publicity and everything went to New Orleans. Take a ride with me, and I’ll show you where the damage is at. It’s from here, straight down this coastline, into Bay St. Louis and Waveland. I think it was about, I think they estimated about anywhere from 85 to 90 percent of my town, Pass Christian, was wiped out. Where my house was at, there was twenty-nine feet of water, and I didn’t see twenty-nine feet of water in New Orleans anywhere. All the films and things they showed, but I mean, you know, big city, big publicity. But I tell you what. President Bush came to the Gulf Coast probably about fifteen trips, and he’ll get my vote anytime he decides to run for something. He got it in the past; he’ll get it again.

Gemmill: John, I know you’ve talked about clearing the streets and whatnot. Can you give us maybe another example of your role as chief throughout the aftermath of the storm in your community?

Dubuisson: Primarily protection of property, making sure that we had people on the road and people’s property was being protected. And as much as we tried, we had a lot of thievery. I mean, people were stealing stuff that wasn’t nailed down, especially copper and different metals like that, just unbelievable. I mean, hmm, looting? We should shoot them on sight. That’s all there is to it. It’s just pitiful. I mean, a person’s suffered enough because they’ve lost just about everything. And you might have a few things left at your home or whatever, and then some son of a bitch goes in there and steals it from you. That’s pitiful. But protection for the citizens that remained, and that would mean making sure that we have enough people to protect
them, and we used a lot of out-of-town officers. We had officers from Kansas, West Virginia, Virginia, Florida. I don’t know if we had any from Texas or not, but we had a lot of officers come in to work. And I mean, we had game wardens that came in to work. And you assigned them a position or whatever, and they fulfilled it. They were here to the end.

Gemmill: How long were they here?

Dubuisson: Some of them were here just about a year; some of them stayed at least that long I’d say, because right after the storm, all of my guys returned. I had a full complement of officers after the storm. They stayed; a few of them left. The ones that left, left because they really didn’t have ties to the community, family, whatever, and they were offered positions in another state or whatever, for more money. And they didn’t have anything to keep them here; so they left, and we replaced them. But that’s basically about it.

Gemmill: And in an ideal world, what would you like to see in the rebuilding of your community?

Dubuisson: A few more businesses to help support the tax base. Businesses, though, I’m not talking about major businesses like Wal-Mart or something like that. Of course, we need the Wal-Mart, and it’s back. Everybody needs a Wal-Mart. (laughter) And everybody should have a Wal-Mart, but mom-and-pop shops, like you go in a little, small store and get something, something like that. Right now, we haven’t had a supermarket in Pass Christian since Katrina. We hadn’t had a place to buy groceries at all. I mean, we have had to go either here to Long Beach or Bay St. Louis or Waveland to purchase groceries. Well, you can’t blame the people. I know we’ve had a couple of different people look at, wanting to put some sort of, say, small grocery store in town, but they knew that Wal-Mart was coming back. And since they handle groceries and everything, that would just knock them in the head. They couldn’t afford to stay in business, so you can’t blame them. I mean, you know. But basically a small town like it was, quiet, peaceful. We don’t want to get it to the point where you got too much traffic in town and things like that.

Gemmill: What are some of your hopes and fears for the future of the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Dubuisson: For the whole Gulf Coast or just Pass Christian?

Gemmill: In general, or you can—

Dubuisson: Well, I hope that it does rebuild better than what it was before. It’s going to be a different town; everything’s going to be new. I think the city’s adopted smart code, which supposedly is supposed to make it a walking-type community. Eh, (laughter) you know, it might and might not happen. And one of the biggest fears that I’ve got—and I’ve seen it already—is that people are going to start projects that
they’re not going to be able to complete. In fact, we’ve had a project right in the heart of town, started as a condo, and big ideas, big plans, and then of course the money situation with the economy today the way it is, it put a stop on it. And right now all we’ve got is a big vacant lot with steel structures, standing, and nobody knows when or if it’s going to start again. And I just hate to see things like that get started in Pass Christian and wind up there as an eyesore, because the town’s too pretty to just let it go like that.

Gemmill: John, we talked about the FEMA trailers and insurance. Have you had any experience with faith-based groups? I know you talked about the (inaudible).

Dubuisson: Oh, yeah. Faith-based groups, yeah. I’m going to tell you one thing about the faith-based groups. Some of them came from Canada, too. In fact, one of the guys, well, a couple of guys that worked on my mother’s house was from Canada, and they were great. The Mennonites and just about every denomination or faith that you can think of responded. And I mean, if it wouldn’t have been for the volunteers—I don’t know how people do it because I would like to do it, but I could not personally afford to do it, pick up, leave their jobs, leave their families, and go help somebody that you don’t even know, [someone] you’ve never seen before. And I mean, spend time building them a home. I don’t know how people do it, but yeah, that’s a good question, and the answer to that was they were great, absolutely. And the city would not be where it’s at today if it hadn’t have been for the volunteers. That’s true. Yeah. It is amazing; it really is. It’s unbelievable.

Gemmill: And how long do you think it’s going to take for the Gulf Coast to fully recover from the hurricane?

Dubuisson: Well, I said it the day after the hurricane, and ye of little faith and people that don’t believe it, we won’t live to see it, not to be totally recovered, because the Coast was just getting to the point of recovery with Hurricane Camille. You could still see scars from Camille, but my kids might see it. I mean, we’re going to see a lot of construction, new construction, but to be totally back to where it was or better than it was, which it’s going to be, I won’t see it.

Gemmill: What do you hope for the kids? I know Jocelyn and I have talked to a lot of adults and everything, but just seeing the artwork from the kids, what do you hope for the children of the community who lived through this? What do you hope for them?

Dubuisson: Well, I want to hope they see a better community, which they will. And I hope that it doesn’t, I think scar would be too strong of a statement. But there’s some kids that’s, it’s going to affect their lives for the rest of their life. And I hope it really doesn’t mess up their lives because of this thing, because there was families that lost some relative during this, and they were uprooted from their community, had to go somewhere else, live there for a while, and like I said, a lot of them haven’t returned yet. So I just hope it doesn’t scar them.
Wattam: Who do you think were the heroes of the storm?

Dubuisson: Probably the volunteers that came here after the storm. I would say they would be at the top of the list because I mean, like I said, I don’t know how they do it. I couldn’t do it. And I don’t mean older people; I mean younger people, y’all’s age. I couldn’t get over the younger people who gave up their spring breaks, summer vacations, to come build a house, clean out a house that could be cleaned out, mucked out, whatever they call it. I don’t know. But the kids came here; they worked from daylight to dark in the slick, in the muck, got up the next day and did it again. So anybody that says that the younger people are a lost generation, even though they spend their time on the computer, playing video games, don’t want to get out in the sunshine, da, da, da, da, they’re wrong. It’s kind of like FEMA. They’re wrong about the younger kids. And I’ve heard it, and if you were here to see them work, you would say the same thing. It’s going to be a good generation.

Wattam: That’s your hope for the future.

Dubuisson: Yeah, definitely.

Gemmill: What’s the best thing that you’ve seen happening as a marker of recovery or other benchmark? What’s the thing that you’ve noticed most throughout the recovery in the community?

Dubuisson: The people that are returning to the city, I guess, and the businesses. We have had some new businesses come into town, small businesses, which we weren’t sure that we would be able to attract any new businesses right away, but we’ve got some that have opened up, and hopefully there’s some more out there that want to come to Pass Christian, because that’s what we’re looking for. We’re not looking for any larger businesses. We just like the small stuff.

Wattam: How many people have moved back to the community who had evacuated and lost their homes?

Dubuisson: Well, right now, I want to say the population is probably about four thousand, maybe somewhere between thirty-six hundred and four thousand, and at one point or another, they said about 90 percent, between 85, 90 percent of the town was gone. You might have had maybe, right after the storm, maybe a thousand people left in town, if that many. And that would have been on the east end of town where there was no water damage. So we’re getting people back.

Gemmill: John, what’s the biggest problem that you have now, moving forward after Katrina?

Dubuisson: Problem? Getting a police facility built. We’re looking at doing that now. We’ve got the plans. We’re waiting on the board and the mayor to put it out for
bids, and that’s our biggest holdup right now. We’re still working out of two trailers, and it’s not pleasant by no means.

**Wattam:** That’s been a long time working out of trailers, too. (laughter)

**Dubuisson:** Yeah. First worked out of a trailer about as big as this little table right here, and I mean, all it had in it basically was radio equipment so that we could communicate right after the storm. We called it the horse trailer because it wasn’t much bigger than a horse trailer, and then we brought a doublewide in, and a portable building. That’s what we’ve been working out of since, and it’s hard to—I mean, like when [Hurricane] Gustav came through this past year, we had to take and unload all of our computer equipment, all of our NCIC equipment, radio equipment. We had to move it out of that building, put it in the truck, and drive it to higher and safer ground. So I mean this is just, this is ridiculous. And then after that we had to do it again when Rita was coming through or whatever it was because we don’t want to lose the equipment again. We lost everything in the storm. So.

**Wattam:** What did you learn from your experience that you could share if there were to be another experience like Hurricane Katrina in the future?

**Dubuisson:** Let the last person leaving Pass Christian turn out the lights, because we all leaving. No, I wouldn’t put my guys back in that situation again, and I wouldn’t advise—property is not worth losing your life over. You can build another house; you can buy another car; you can buy another gun; you can buy another dog, but some of the stupid reasons people give for staying in something like this. “Oh, somebody’s going to loot my house.” Well, you got insurance. And people don’t realize until you experience almost dying how valuable life is. And I know thirteen people that can tell you how valuable life is. Yeah.

**Wattam:** We’re nearing pretty much the end of our interview. Is there anything else that we haven’t yet talked about that you’d like to share and have your stories be heard about Hurricane Katrina?

**Dubuisson:** No, not really. I don’t guess. (laughter) I think you covered everything. You did a good job.

**Gemmill:** Well, thank you so much for your time.

**Dubuisson:** You’re welcome.

**Gemmill:** And sharing your stories.

**Wattam:** Thank you.

(end of interview)