Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Vaughn G. Couk

Interviewer: Trey Bunn

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Biography

Vaughn G. Couk was born in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1955. His parents were immigrants from Ireland and Hungary, and he was adopted before birth by Margarett Couk. He received his G.E.D. from Aransas-Pass High School, then attended Houston Community College.

Mr. Couk served in the Vietnam War, earning the Vietnam War Ribbon and the Marksman Medal, before he was honorably discharged from the US Navy with the rank of E-2.

Professionally, Mr. Couk has worked in the bar and restaurant management business. He has also worked in the telecommunications industry as a repairman, installer, phone systems programmer, and systems analyst.

He currently lives in Columbia, South Carolina, where he plans to make his permanent home.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

VAUGHN G. COUK

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Vaughn G. Couk and is taking place on February 6, 2006. The interviewer is Trey Bunn.

Bunn: OK, this is an interview with Vaughn Couk, also known as “Cowboy.” Today’s date is, let me check, February 6, 2006. So if you could just kind of tell me just a very brief rundown, then we’ll get into more details and stuff, just how you, you know, came to Columbia and when and just how that came about.

Couk: OK. Got to Columbia September due to the Hurricane Katrina there in New Orleans. I left the morning of the eleventh day after the storm, was put on a plane with no known destination, in the air for twenty minutes before they came on and told us where we were going, and it was West Columbia. Everybody on the plane hollered, “Yea!” And then you could hear everybody, “Where is that?” (laughter) And we landed here that afternoon, that evening, and that’s how I wound up in Columbia.

Bunn: All right.

Couk: Which I like very much; I’ve decided to relocate here.

Bunn: You’re going to stay here?

Couk: Oh, yeah.

Bunn: OK. Well, then, how long did you live near the Coast?

Couk: I was in New Orleans nineteen years. I had left and moved to the Yucatan for two years prior to the storm, moved back just in time to be there for Katrina.

Bunn: OK. So, why were you in New Orleans, why were you living there?

Couk: I was—what I do for a living normally is I am a turnkey for bars and restaurants. I find them that are in the red and they need to be brought back into the black. And I was running two of them there; two twenty-four-hour-a-day bars, one on Bourbon Street and one off Bourbon. And I had come back from the Yucatan because I went there to get away from that for a while and I wound up doing it down there, as well. So I thought I might as well come back to the states, it’s better money.
**Bunn:** Right.

**Couk:** So I came back.

**Bunn:** OK. Let’s see. So, what can of—can you describe any attachment you have to the region or what it means to you, that sort of thing?

**Couk:** New Orleans?

**Bunn:** Yes.

**Couk:** Very much of an attachment. It’s due to the history. It’s one of the older cities in the states. Due to the history, the people, the culture. It’s very relaxed yet at the same time it’s very, very fast. For a place called “The Big Easy” it’s really not quite so easy.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Couk:** It’s very enjoyable. It’s always interesting. You meet so many different people from all over the world, not just the United States, especially in my business.

**Bunn:** Would you consider it, I mean, in that sense, a big city?

**Couk:** Fairly big, yeah, yeah. It’s one of the [larger cities on the Gulf Coast]—as I’ve always said it’s probably the largest big city—or the smallest big city I’ve ever lived in.

**Bunn:** Right, very diverse.

**Couk:** Yeah.

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Couk:** Very diverse and very, very interesting in the fact that you can run into someone that’s been in the city for many, many years that you know and haven’t seen, and just one day be walking down the street and there they are, and from other parts of the country, for that matter. You can go to New Orleans and get lost if you choose to do so.

**Bunn:** All right. And now where was your neighborhood?

**Couk:** I’m sorry?

**Bunn:** Where was your neighborhood?
Couk: I was in the Lower Garden District; it’s called Magazine and Washington, or that intersection of where I was. It’s part of the older area of the city. Very beautiful, very majestic homes. It’s just real, real nice. Very clean area.

Bunn: OK. All right. So what—could you describe, maybe, the neighborhood a little bit more, your home and everything before the hurricane?

Couk: Very beautiful. Very, very beautiful. In fact, it’s one of the areas that the carriage rides would pass through to point out different homes and different businesses that’ve been there for 150 years. And they call it the Garden District because of all of the vegetation and all the plant life. Really, really nice—was really, really nice.

Bunn: All right. OK, do you know how the neighborhood or your house specifically was affected by the flood, flooding or wind or anything?

Couk: Where I was I missed the water by about six blocks; it stopped just short. But the wind and the rain itself was tremendous. A lot of the trees, three or four hundred year old trees just uprooted, torn down. Some of the homes that’ve been there through countless hurricanes, totally demolished. My place was wiped out; that’s how I lost my teeth, thanks to a joist, roof joist coming through the ceiling which I met very abruptly. (laughter)

Bunn: All right. Were there any traditions you carried on in your community? Were you ever interested in Mardi Gras and the parades, and stuff like that?

Couk: Oh yeah. More so the—Mardi Gras, of course, but that was more for tourists to come see. For us it was more of the Jazz Fest and St. Patrick’s Day. St. Patrick’s Day was huge down there.

Bunn: Really.

Couk: And the St. Patrick’s Day Parade came right in front of my house, so every year we’d have a big barbecue. They’d throw beads and cabbages and potatoes, and we’d throw them beer. (laughter)

Bunn: So what are your—what would you say were your most vivid memories were of your community before the hurricane?

Couk: Before the hurricane would be the influx of people from all, all backgrounds, very diverse flow of people from all over the world. It was absolutely great. It was fantastic. That and the community, how well the community bonded.

Bunn: Right.
**Couk:** The people were[,] in areas other than the French Quarter, friendly]—you could walk down the street and everybody would say hello to you without looking at you and wondering what you wanted from them.

**Bunn:** Right, OK. So, what do you think, they were communities—actually the problems or strengths were?

**Couk:** The problems were absolutely drugs; very big problem with drugs. And the lack of a lot of the people that live there, the lack of their desire to do better and work. They just wanted to sit on the street corners and drink and do drugs; that was the real problem. The strengths were the people in the community itself trying to help those people stop, which was pretty much a lost cause.

**Bunn:** Really.

**Couk:** Not good.

**Bunn:** What would they do, I mean to try to help them out? Were there programs in place?

**Couk:** Yeah, they had programs, different, various programs in place including work programs. And the work programs looked like they were working on paper, when in actuality all the people were doing was taking the money and going and buying more drugs.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Couk:** And so that was pretty bad.

**Bunn:** What about—do you have any opinions on like either local, state and federal politicians before the hurricane or after the hurricane, any of that—how did you feel about that whole thing went? I know a lot of people have very differing opinions on who should’ve done what and all that kind of thing.

**Couk:** Well, prior to the storm—corrupt. After the storm—more corrupt. (laughter) Absolutely. They—the city and state politicians down there, for the most part, for the most part are more concerned with putting money in their pockets and getting their pork belly items passed as they are to doing anything for the community itself. For example, when the lottery was voted in, it was to provide for money for the schools and repave roads and sidewalks; well, none of that had gotten done and I was witness to that for many, many years. It just didn’t happen. But the politicians got better and better houses and nicer and nicer cars.

**Bunn:** That’s politicians. (laughter)

**Couk:** Uh-huh.
Bunn: All right, what about after the hurricanes, how do you think that whole thing went as far as, you know, down to the local—I mean some people have, you know, about the mayor or the governor or all the way up to the, you know, FEMA, the President, and all that kind of stuff?

Couk: It’s ongoing and will be, I say, probably for at least another eighteen to twenty-four months. They are moving so slowly. They’re not looking at the bigger picture. They’re worried about beautifying the city and this is their opportunity in their minds to make it more modern, which is absolutely not what needs to be done. The beauty of the City of New Orleans was the heritage and the oldness of it, so, and they don’t seem to be concerned with that. Such as the Ninth Ward, they want to flatten the Ninth Ward. Mid-City, they want to flatten Mid-City. Those are a couple of the oldest parts of New Orleans and I just don’t understand their way of thinking at all; makes no sense. And as far as FEMA goes, I care not to comment too much on them because I’ll probably get pretty ticked off and I’d rather not do that at this moment.

Bunn: All right.

Couk: I’m still fighting with them.

Bunn: Really. OK. Well, what do you think about the levee system?

Couk: The levee system has been known for at least ten years, that I know of, that it was failing. They were—there was a ruling that every week they had to do a soil sample test to check for moisture in the levees and they did not do it. I lived, at one point, lived right on one of the levees, never, not even in five years, never saw anybody doing soil samples. They knew that they needed to be strengthened, they knew they were too [low and saturated, as well as] not high enough, and they never did anything about it. They would pass point taxes on cigarettes and different items to be used for the levees, but it never got there. There again, the corrupt politicians.

Bunn: They were keeping it for themselves?

Couk: They were keeping it for themselves; absolutely.

Bunn: Yeah. So what are your impressions of the strengths of the levees? You said that you knew that they were already failing, so.

Couk: There was no strength to them. It was one of the biggest jokes I’ve ever seen; it really was. It made no sense. They would spend money to put up new street lights. They would spend money to put a jogging and bicycle path on top of them, but they didn’t do anything to strengthen them. They knew well in advance that if a storm came of any magnitude, even a force two that they would have a breach somewhere in the levee system and they just did nothing about it. They keep feeling, “Well, we’re
not going to get hit, we’re not going to get hit.” Well, we got hit; we got hit really hard.

Bunn: So you probably—I mean did you, do you think that it wouldn’t have protected, you know, the city if something like that had happened?

Couk: No, it wouldn’t have protected it. It was inevitable that this was going to happen.

Bunn: Right.

Couk: I’m surprised that it didn’t cause more breaches and a larger degree of flooding than what it did. They got lucky.

Bunn: Really?

Couk: Yeah, they got lucky. I’m surprised the whole downtown area wasn’t completely underwater. There was water all the way to the Superdome which is at the first block of downtown. They were real, real lucky.

Bunn: Yeah. So has the storm changed any way that you think about the community itself or maybe just memories of it or what you think could have?

Couk: It hasn’t changed anything. It’s just brought more to the forefront of my mind the mentality of the people there. You know, they have such a stigma about race. For example, I know many people are aware of this, there’s been a movement saying, in the black communities, stating that the levees were bombed or exploded at certain points, in certain areas of the levee in the Ninth Ward area, which is completely ludicrous. It’s just a faulty levee system.

Bunn: Right.

Couk: But the people at hand are so used to civil unrest in the racial end of it that this is their golden opportunity to make a real big stink about it and they’re doing it. They’re trying real, real hard. And the federal government isn’t really helping a whole lot by awarding people that I know for a fact didn’t have apartments or homes or anything. They were drug dealers living on the street and they just awarded $10,000 at a pop to these people; that makes absolutely no sense to me at all. Here I am, I’m still fighting with FEMA just to get my property damage and this is five months later. You know, if I don’t get it, I don’t get it. At this point it’s beyond concern. I’m getting myself back together again so things are coming along. But they’re just adding ammunition, fuel to the fire by doing what they did with the $10,000 to these people. It’s crazy, it makes absolutely no sense, no sense. There are many people out here in South Columbia that received the $10,000, such as some of the people at the same hotel I was and a hotel right down—two of them right down the street, and several of them finally wound up in the hospital because they immediately went out and found
crack, you know, they’re just blowing that money. I don’t understand the government’s way of thinking on that one. I mean I’m just an old country boy but I got more brains than that. (laughter)

**Bunn:** Yeah, sounds like what I hear some people say that, you know, I heard this phrase used a lot, especially right after the storm, “Just, you know, throwing money at the problem; not actually doing anything about it.”

**Couk:** Yeah, that’s all they’re doing is throwing money at the problem. And the worst part is they’re throwing money at the problem, they think. They’re not throwing it at the problem, they’re misdirecting it. They’re just throwing it out there; they’re not throwing it at the problem. If they would even throw it at the problem, maybe the levees would get strengthened. Who knows? Could be. Maybe New Orleans would have lights all over now. Right now—I just talked to a friend of mine yesterday, they’re on Magazine Street—outside of the French Quarter and outside of the Garden District they still don’t have lights. This is a major metropolitan area and they can’t even get lights back on? But they can sure throw that money out there.

**Bunn:** Right. So you think that—you mentioned that the racial thing, do you think that people are sort of trying to make what happened here into another racial debate?

**Couk:** Oh, absolutely, absolutely. It’s on—it pops up on CNN and MSNBC every so often. They don’t expand on it much, they just kind of throw out little bits and pieces here and there about the racial columns and what people are saying. They’re not—here again, they’re not listening and it’s only going to get worse.

**Bunn:** So, as far as the hurricane itself, how and when did you first hear about it, when it was coming?

**Couk:** I guess five days. Five days before it hit, it was apparent that some part of that area of New Orleans and Mississippi was going to get it. They—it was two days in advance before they really started giving information as to like it’s really going to hit here. They were still in hopes of dodging the bullet, as they have so many years in the past.

**Bunn:** And how did you hear about it? Was it TV news?

**Couk:** Yeah, TV news.

**Bunn:** OK. All right. So then when you heard about it, I mean did you—you said that you left there eleven days after the storm.

**Couk:** Um-hum.

**Bunn:** So, you didn’t evacuate?
Couk: No, I had, as I said I was running two twenty-four-hour-a-day bars. My main concern at that point was the elderly and the people that come—came to my bars that weren’t really working to make sure and try and help them get out. And make sure—because I was really concerned about the elderly that had come in, for sure, get them out and make sure that—I had twenty-one bartenders between the two and make sure they all got out. I had my route of escape or plan already. The—my landlord, who is also a very good friend of mine, I was going to ride out with him. Well, the day of the storm I spoke with him and he said, “Well, I’m going to leave in two hours.” And I said, “Well, it’s going to take me about an hour-and-a-half, hour and fifteen minutes to get both bars done. I’ve got pretty much got everybody gone.” Because I was working both bars. I had two bartenders that stayed and I would work two shifts, they’d work one at each bar. And by the time I got back to my apartment, which was only about forty-five minutes after I spoke to him, he was gone, and that was it. I was stuck; there was no other way out. I called everybody I could think of.

Bunn: Do you know why he left without you or was he just—

Couk: He got scared. He got scared.

Bunn: What were the names of the bars, by the way?

Couk: Sing Sing on Bourbon Street and Hog’s Bar on Chartres Street right across from the Marriott. Hog’s has been there probably, oh, Lord, it’s been there forty-something years. It’s only been called Hog’s Bar the last fifteen, eighteen, I guess, something like that.

Bunn: So, what happened, I mean, once you knew that you were stuck there, what did you do to prepare?

Couk: I gathered as much food and water, canned food and water as I could. And found out that one of my neighbors had left—he was out of town already and wasn’t able to get back, so I took care of his two kittens and then we had two cats that just kind of lived on the property, I got them in the apartment with me, too, and just hunkered down and waited.

Bunn: Yeah. At your apartment?

Couk: At my apartment, yeah.

Bunn: OK, all right. Let me pause this for a second. All right, so you stayed. Were you by yourself, just you and the cats?

Couk: Yeah, yeah. I had me and the four critters; five critters altogether, me and four others.
Bunn: Right. (laughter) All right. So when the hurricane came through, what was that like? What did you experience personally?

Couk: (laughs) It was interesting, to say the least.

Bunn: Yeah.

Couk: The power went out about one o’clock in the morning, I guess, one or two o’clock in the morning. And that’s when I knew that, you know, it was going to be pretty bad. I’ve been through other hurricanes, Hurricane Celia out in Texas which killed a bunch of people, so I wasn’t in total shock. And where I lived I had large mansions on either side and behind me, so I was living in a garage apartment. They call them “carriage houses” down there. So I felt fairly secure until about five o’clock in the morning when the roof started coming off, and so that’s when I knew, OK, this is not good. And I wasn’t going to go to one of the shelters because I knew how that was going to be at the Convention Center and the Superdome. I knew not to go there. I knew that—I knew what that was going to be. No way was I going there. But anyway, so I just kind of held onto the mattress and one of the cats was trying to get into my body through my armpit. (laughter) That was Greasy; she’s a character. And the other one ripped a hole in my brand new box spring. I had just gotten a brand new queen size box spring and mattress. She tore a hole in the box spring and got up under there, which was the best thing she could’ve done. And I just started hanging on and watching, you know. The more the roof came off, the more I got wet and the more I saw everything flying around, you know, going across the top of the building. It was interesting. I wouldn’t care to do it again.

Bunn: Right. Well, at what point did—you said that, what was it, one of the beams in the roof came in and hit you?

Couk: Yeah, one of the beams from the roof—after the outer portion of the roof came off, then the beams started breaking, and whatnot, and one came down—and of course the ceiling in the apartment was already gone—and one of them came down. I saw it coming so I tried to dodge it as best I could, which was good, it would’ve hit me in the chest otherwise and it hit me in the lower jaw, and pretty much knocked out all my teeth except the few pieces it left in there[, just the bottoms, though].

Bunn: Wow.

Couk: But that was really the worst of it. I mean I didn’t get hurt bad other than that.

Bunn: OK.

Couk: And that wasn’t that bad, it’s just aggravating not being able to eat anything for so long.

Bunn: Um-hum. So, then after the storm passed, what did you do then?
Couk: That Monday afternoon, the next day, the winds had died down at probably about fifty miles an hour, forty, fifty miles an hour and I couldn’t stand it anymore, I had to go outside. So I reached for the door which was in a downward motion instead of straight out, and I went outside and started looking around, and saw the damage and it—I was just awed, it was amazing. It was amazing how much damage. And I started finding pieces of plastic to put up on the roof, and as I was doing it, I stood up at one point to stretch, and I started looking around. And amazingly enough, and I looked straight up in the sky and said, “All right, Big Guy, that’s a good one.” Because mine was the only one that was really demolished.

Bunn: Really?

Couk: The rest of them have pieces of roof gone, maybe chimney gone, roof tiles gone; but mine was tore up and I thought I was in a safe haven, oops.

Bunn: Yeah. Yeah, I’ve heard about that wind, it’s completely random.

Couk: Yeah, oh, yeah.

Bunn: One minute perfectly intact, the next—

Couk: Well, the building, if you were in my apartment looking towards the street, the house to the right was only five and a half feet out my bathroom window, and the one to the left was maybe fifteen feet away. I mean they were right there and they fared fantastically. The one on the right, the people were very lucky because they just finished putting on a new roof. And it’s a major, major house. I mean it’s a mansion; it’s a four-story mansion. Probably—the building itself is probably 180 feet long, you know, it’s huge. Which is one of the reasons I thought I was in a safe haven—oops, wrong. (laughter)

Bunn: So, OK, so you said you went outside. What else happened, you know, after, you know, the next few days afterwards and what did you do?

Couk: Well, later on that day, that afternoon, as the winds got down probably eighteen, twenty miles an hour, I suppose, that’s when I saw multitudes of people robbing everything they could get their hands on. They’d be walking up the street with big screen TVs and guns, and everything from the Super Wal-Mart. Like, I’m thinking to myself, “OK, you idiot, where you going to plug that TV in?” (laughter) You know, I mean come on, let’s think about this.

Bunn: Yeah.

Couk: And, yeah, it was just rampant, rampant burglary, I mean, just everywhere. I secured a couple of the houses around me, boarded up doors, you know, so people would know somebody’s watching them, and hopefully they made it through. They
made it through to the morning of the eleventh day, I know that. After that I have no clue.

**Bunn**: All right.

**Couk**: The worst part was seeing the dead people, I mean because it wasn’t like it was war, it was from the storm and to see the bodies bloated and laying there in the streets was just weird; very strange.

**Bunn**: Yeah.

**Couk**: And no one come along to pick them up or anything. And at one point the biggest part of the New Orleans Police Department left town. I was a witness to that. I mean physically a witness to it. I went to the Eighth District and started banging on the door just to see if anybody answered—nobody there; they were gone, man.

**Bunn**: You mentioned, I mean just kind of an aside you mentioned war. I noticed the Operation Iraqi Freedom pictures—was that you or?

**Couk**: No, a friend. I was in Nam; a friend of mine is over there.

**Bunn**: OK.

**Couk**: Yeah.

**Bunn**: I was just curious, I had a friend who was over there for a year, too.

**Couk**: Oh, really?

**Bunn**: Yeah.

**Couk**: Yeah, that’s another type of Nam thing.

**Bunn**: Right.

**Couk**: Anyway.

**Bunn**: OK, let me pause real quick. So, what happened between the time, I mean when after, immediately after and then when you ended up—how did you end up on the plane out to Columbia?

**Couk**: The morning of the eleventh day I had heard a couple of rumors about two people getting cholera and I decided, well, I can fight everything but that, I’m out of here. So I let the Airborne—I was on Bourbon Street protecting one of the bars there and the Airborne was there, and they had been telling me if I needed to get out, let them know. So I finally said, “Hey, Cap, you know, time to go.” And I was going to
walk to the debarkation point and they wouldn’t let me; they had an air conditioned van come pick me up. I thought that was really nice; that was really cool. Then I had been supplying them with water and energy drinks because I had it in the bar, so I might as well give it to somebody and they needed it, so I gave it to them. And that’s how I had wound up getting to the airport. Well, I got to the disembarkation point and then was put on a bus, and somebody came to the door of the bus and said, “Well, who wants to go on a helicopter?” Boom, I was off. (laughter) I said, “Me.” So I took a trip on the Blackhawk; that was pretty interesting. Yeah, that was pretty interesting.

**Bunn:** OK.

**Couk:** I had one pair of—I salvaged two pairs of pants and I put on my clean pair for the trip. And, just a funny little side note, on the helicopter I just happened to sit right where there was a hydraulic leak.

**Bunn:** Oh, man.

**Couk:** So, yeah, I know, I was bummed out, “Oh, man, look at my pants.” (laughter)

**Bunn:** All right. So they, you know, they took you what from—well, the helicopter was to the—

**Couk:** To the airport, yeah.

**Bunn:** OK. All right, so then, so you guys all got on the plane, and who else, like, what other kind of people were on there with you, did you notice that?

**Couk:** A couple of people that I know from there. One person that I’ve known for fifteen years that was actually working at one of the bars that the same owner had, and in fact I looked at him and said, “OK, it’s time to go.” And we got on the plane and left. And there was a couple of other people on the plane that I knew. And then several people from the Ninth Ward and Mid-City where the flooding was just—that’s where a lot, most of the people died, and they were on there. And animals, dogs, cats, snakes.

**Bunn:** Oh.

**Couk:** Yeah, that was pretty cool.

**Bunn:** What about—what happened to the other cats that you had?

**Couk:** Oh, they’re fine. I [think]—from the second week I was up here, I guess, I was finally able to get a hold of someone in New Orleans and they had been taking care of them for me. I put out as much, many bags of food as I could and then as many piles of open food as I could to make sure they were all right, and they’re doing fine.
Bunn: Did you ever find out what happened to the landlord who left you behind?

Couk: Yeah, yeah, he’s still a friend of mine. (laughter) Anyway.

Bunn: OK.

Couk: Yeah, he didn’t get back to New Orleans until just last month.

Bunn: Really?

Couk: Yeah.

Bunn: Is he going to stay there or?

Couk: Yeah, yeah.

Bunn: OK.

Couk: The house and—there’s five. The house, his, the main house and then there was four apartments and then the garage apartment, carriage house that I was in; everything’s fine except the carriage house.

Bunn: Oh, OK.

Couk: Yeah, yeah he was—everything turned out fine, except my face.

Bunn: Right. OK, so you arrived in Columbia. So what happened at that point?

Couk: At that point, from the airport we were taken to the evacuee center on Pickens Street, South Carolina CARES, and everybody was just awesome. They were fantastic. None of them had ever had to do anything like this before. They didn’t know this from that but they did everything they could and they did a fantastic job. And they still are, the center’s now out on two nights and they’re still doing great work. I’m really, really pleased with that. They made sure that anybody needed medical attention got it. They made sure that we were gotten to our hotels as soon as possible, given food there at the evacuee center, and then they made sure they brought food to the hotels. And it was great to be in a place with lights and air conditioning and hot water. Well, water period.

Bunn: Right.

Couk: And hot water—it was fantastic. It was really, really good. And they did real well. They—one of the main concerns was getting families back together which was just an arduous task and a super large task. They’re still doing it. That and animals as
well, which I thought was outstanding. That was very good. I was real pleased to see that.

**Bunn:** Yeah. Which hotel did you—did you just go to one hotel and stay there until you ended up at Masters?

**Couk:** Yeah, I was at—right, I was at Masters Inn Airport. And the second day I was there I decided, “Well, I need to see what my surroundings are,” so I started walking. I didn’t realize it was six miles to where I—the destination I wound up stopping at which was Five Points. Yeah, well, I found Vista first—the Wild Haire at Vista. Everybody [looked quite happy, so]—I walked in there and ordered a drink because I still had a couple of dollars in my pocket, and they wouldn’t let me buy anything.

**Bunn:** Oh, yeah?

**Couk:** Oh yeah, they were great. “No, you’re not buying that,” “You’re from New Orleans? Oh, no, no, you’re not buying that.” And I left from there and just started walking again because learning, you know, my surroundings and everything and I wound up finding Five Points down at Delaney’s and CJ’s. And same thing, I kept [trying]—I tried to pay it and they wouldn’t let me pay it, it’s like “No.” So I’ve got—I have met some really good people that have become really good friends from there and then, of course, from all over the city, too. People are really, really nice here. I was here two weeks and decided I was going to stay. And New Orleans, it’s going to be a long, long time before it’s back to a portion of what it was before.

**Bunn:** Yeah. All right.

**Couk:** Yeah, it’ll never be the same.

**Bunn:** As far as—I’m kind of skipping ahead on the questions here, but I just—when you mentioned that, it makes me wonder—I hear some people talking about, like rebuilding it in the more modern sense like you mentioned, do you think that’s really a mistake?

**Couk:** That’s, yeah, that’s a mistake. Absolutely it’s a mistake. They’re going—it’s going to lose a lot of its natural, ugly charm. (laughter)

**Bunn:** When the tape ran out you had said that it would lose its mystique.

**Couk:** Yeah, it would lose its mystique, that a lot of people—if they modernize it the way they’re talking, I believe they’ll lose a lot of repeat business. People have been going there from all over the country, all over the world, for years and years they come back every year. They’re going to come back and if they modernize it like they’re speaking about doing it or the way they’re thinking about doing it, a lot of people won’t go back. They might as well go to Vegas.
Bunn: Right.

Couk: It will just be another money-collecting pot.

Bunn: Right, a tourist trap.

Couk: Um-hum.

Bunn: OK, well, so you said you definitely had been treated well and, you know, the way it really was—

Couk: Yeah, and everybody’s really nice up here. The—we were up here probably, not even a month I guess, and I heard so many people from the Gulf Coast region say, “Now this is what Southern hospitality’s all about.” And it really is. Southern hospitality is alive and well, although a lot of us always thought this was north. (laughter)

Bunn: Yeah, I know. OK, well, have you had any interesting, funny, or, you know, bad experiences since you’ve been here or anything in particular besides the free drinks when you mentioned you were from New Orleans?

Couk: I’ve had a lot [of people—well]—there’s several people that have told me, when I’m—because I’m helping out at the center right now, I feel that I should help put something back from what I’ve gotten. And also I know the people and the demeanor of the people from down there, and the people at the center aren’t used to that type of person, so I let them know that, hey, I could be helpful and after a couple of weeks of talking to them, they said, “You know what? You’re right.” You know, because they started learning the demeanor of the people from down there, especially in New Orleans. So, they asked me to help them out, so I’ve been doing that. Other than that, when that’s finished, which is short term of course, I’ve had several people tell me that, you know, when I’m done with that I’ll have a job, so that’s really good.

Bunn: Down here or?

Couk: Yeah, here. So that’s really good. Which is different types of jobs like, such as maintenance here in the apartment complex, electrician helper with this one company, but what I’m trying to do and what I will do is get back into the bar and restaurant business. That’s what I do. Seems to be my forte.

Bunn: Right. Are there other families in the same apartment complex?

Couk: Yeah, I don’t know, they had already placed people here. See, I came out and found my own apartment.

Bunn: OK.
**Couk:** I wasn’t going to wait because I didn’t want to wind up somewhere I didn’t want to be. And, but there are other people here in Riverbend that were placed here, so they got real lucky because they got placed in a good spot. But the list was already gone before I started helping, so I haven’t seen the list to see who it is yet, but once I get the list that I’m doing now completed, then I’ll find out who’s here so I can visit with them. Because when the housing and the household goods and appliances and furniture has all been distributed, which I’m helping do now, then I want to stay with the program to help people get jobs because they’re going to have to have jobs so they don’t lose the apartments and whatnot that they have. And I want to help do that which is real, real important to me. Otherwise, what I’m afraid is going to happen is they’re going to wind up joining the ranks of the homeless here in Columbia and the drug users and abusers and sellers, and I don’t want to see that happen to Columbia because, as I say, I live here now, too, and I’m not going to allow the people that did it to New Orleans do it to Columbia, if there’s anything I can do about it, including run them out of town on the rail. I have no problem with that. I will not put up with it. I like the people here; I’ve been treated really, really nice and it’s a beautiful city and I’m not going to let them tear it up. Nope. (laughter)

**Bunn:** All right. So, you’re—the main thing you’re doing now is helping deliver, you said, like furniture and some things?

**Couk:** What I’m doing now is—no, I’m not doing the actual delivery; other people are doing that. I’m going to each and every person’s household to find out what they have received and what they still need to make sure they get everything that’s possible.

**Bunn:** OK, and that’s supplied by the center?

**Couk:** That’s supplied by the center, the Salvation Army, the Lutheran Church, Baptist—everybody. Everybody is throwing in their hat; you know, they’re all trying to help. It’s really, really great. The outpouring of the people of South Carolina is just amazing. It’s amazing. If we had half of that in New Orleans, it would’ve been such a better place.

**Bunn:** And all this stuff that you have here, I mean how much of this is stuff that you brought or not? I see you didn’t bring anything.

**Couk:** Only thing I brought was one cowboy hat, two shirts—no, three shirts, two pairs of pants and three pairs of boots. Everything else, everything that you see has been donated to me, with the exception of that little radio. (laughter) That’s what I listen—that little bitty, it’s a—what it is, is a small portable radio and that’s what I listen to for the eleven days after the storm. Well, actually only eight days after the storm because the first couple there was no radio.

**Bunn:** Right.
Couk: Yeah, no radio, no cell phones, no landline phones, there was just nothing.

Bunn: Well, all right.

Couk: Complete devastation. I’ve never seen a downtown area with skyscrapers that look like they’ve been bombed.

Bunn: That’s how New Orleans—

Couk: That’s how New Orleans was, yeah, absolutely.

Bunn: I’ve heard the bomb analogy several times.

Couk: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I mean I’ve seen what bombs do but they weren’t in—there weren’t skyscrapers. (laughter)

Bunn: Right. So, have you been back to New Orleans since?

Couk: No.

Bunn: OK.

Couk: I stay in touch with several people that have gone back, probably six to eight different families and single people that have gone back to New Orleans, and they’re all back here.

Bunn: Hm.

Couk: That’s how bad it still is in New Orleans.

Bunn: Yeah.

Couk: They just can’t stay. For one thing, the lack of power, water, and for the other thing, the most important is it’s so depressing to everyone. In fact, my landlord I talked to yesterday, he just—he’s a very bubbly, outgoing, happy person and he sounded so miserable. Yeah. I’d like to get him out of there but he’s stubborn, he won’t go.

Bunn: As far as—because you said he had four other places besides yours that he was renting out?

Couk: Um-hum.

Bunn: Are those people still there or did they leave?
Couk: No, in fact, two of the apartments, we don’t know what happened to them. They got out before the storm, but we have no clue and they haven’t, last I heard, which was yesterday, they had never came back and they had housefuls of furniture and stuff. They just did not go back. So I don’t know what happened to them, I really don’t.

Bunn: Well, all right. Well, let’s—we were kind of talking off tape about that. What about differences between the culture there and here that you, you know, would want to mention if you noticed anything particularly shocking?

Couk: Yeah, the—oh, this is going to sound terrible—the manner of speech is so much better up here.

Bunn: Really?

Couk: Yeah, people actually speak English. It’s great. One of the phrases I cannot stand to hear is “You heard me?” Oh, man, down there I hated it and I told people I hated it down there. When they say it to me, I said, “Don’t you ever say that again around me.” (laughter) And they are more—they’re better spoken, they seem to have more enthusiasm towards life, more ambition, for the most part. Sure, there’s sections here just like any place else that are more low level, for lack of a better term, but even they are more ambitious and enthusiastic than the same areas in New Orleans.

Bunn: Right.

Couk: So the culture, as far as Americanized and American goes, it’s a lot better up here. Man, yeah. (laughter)

Bunn: All right. OK, let’s see.

Couk: I’ve only had two people come up to me and try to bum money or something from me up here.

Bunn: Really?

Couk: In New Orleans, that’s an every-thirty-minute-occasion.

Bunn: Um-hum.

Couk: You know?

Bunn: Yeah, I mean Columbia is, you know, it is the capital city so you’re going to have some of that, I mean, but definitely not as much as other places.

Couk: But it’s surprisingly how little it really is. And you have to remember, I walk five to eight miles almost every day. I cannot stand to just sit in this apartment. And
now that I’m helping the center I’m out even more anyway. But I walk all over. You’ll see me from Irmo to Casey, Lexington to whatever the other side is over there where I got lost. (laughter) And, yeah, I—it’s amazing, I don’t—I’ve walked in parts of Columbia past Hardin street at Millwood, down in the Millwood area, got lost down there one day for about an hour and a half. And even down there in what would be called “The ‘Hood,” I didn’t get harassed or hassled, you know, which really surprised me.

Bunn: Right. So, I mean, so you walk everywhere, you don’t have any—

Couk: Transportation? No, not yet, not yet. These guys. (hits boots)

Bunn: Right. (laughs)

Couk: My boots.

Bunn: All right. Any idea when you may be able to get something like that, or are you OK with walking around here?

Couk: I’m OK with it. I’m getting really tired of it because y’all—well, we, I can say we now—have some really big hills up here. New Orleans is as flat as this coffee table. That was my first encounter of terror when I left the hotel and I got to where Knox, where 302 turns into Knox-Abbott, and I saw that first, you know, and I’m thinking to myself, “what have I done?” But I’ve gotten used to this; it’s not that bad. I’ve walked from Broad River Road back to town and it’s not that bad any more. I’ve gotten used to it, but I’m getting tired of it. I really want—I will get some transportation and that pretty much actually hinges on FEMA at this point. I’m not, you know, I mean the center’s—sure they’re paying me, but they can’t afford to pay much. And I didn’t do it for the pay. I didn’t know I was going to get paid until I started. And they said, “Well, we’re paying you,” which that was a nice bonus.

Bunn: Yeah.

Couk: But, yeah, as soon as I can, believe me, I’m going to get some transportation. Pastor Bob from—I don’t know what the name of the little town is north of here—he, one of his parishioners donated a bicycle for me which I’ll use to go back and forth to the store, I’m sure, but I just don’t really see myself riding around town on it. It just—it would look like the wicked warlock of the South. (laughter) Dun, dun, dun, dun.

Bunn: Yeah. (laughter) All right, this is shifting gears a bit. If you have any thoughts on, as far as the coastline goes, like Katrina, and Rita came through right after that, do you think what those did to the coastline and all that?

Couk: I know that the coastline is a lot closer to the City of New Orleans than it used to be.
**Bunn:** Right.

**Couk:** I’m really concerned about that because it was eroding really bad already. And there again, the monies that were being received by the state were not being used properly. They weren’t—they kept talking about how this amount was set aside for the wetlands, but they never enacted anything with it. So I’m really concerned about that. I have no clue what’s going to happen. And if they don’t do something, if they don’t rebuild the wetlands, the next hurricane, whether the levees are good or not, isn’t going to matter because it’s going to be right there at the city and it’s going to be total devastation instead of just three-fourths.

**Bunn:** Right. So, let’s see, so you were aware of it, as far as the erosion, before that long?

**Couk:** Um-hum, yeah, the erosion was really, really bad. They had been working on it—so they said—for the last twelve, fourteen years supposedly really hard, but all of us that live there, there wasn’t that much obvious that was being done. You know, I mean, you couldn’t really see that much change for the better.

**Bunn:** What—did they say what they were doing? I mean what, you know—

**Couk:** Just trying to—certain parts of it keep people out and so it would rebuild itself as well as putting in new soil and new vegetation, trying to help the vegetation come back. But as I say, there wasn’t that much of it that was apparent.

**Bunn:** All right.

**Couk:** And they really had better get on the ball with that.

**Bunn:** Yeah, and you think that definitely had something to do with how bad Katrina affected them?

**Couk:** Yeah, yeah, it did, that had a lot to do with it. I mean as far as from New Orleans South, Plaquemines and places like that, that just got completely flattened, I mean, the whole town’s just gone. If there had been more of the wetlands, then it wouldn’t have been as bad.

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Couk:** But I mean the water just came and there was nothing to stop it.

**Bunn:** Yeah. So what do you think can be done as far as rebuilding, or how long do you think it would take?
**Couk:** It’s going to take ten or fifteen years to get back to where it was, much less any better. And I don’t know what they’re going to do. I don’t. I really don’t. The way they’re acting right now, they’re pretty much ignoring it. The federal government talks about what they want to do for it; hopefully they will step in and do it. But there again, who knows.

**Bunn:** Right. Well, is there—let me go check this real quick. Was there anything else you’d want to add just in general about your experiences or what you think might happen or could happen? I mean I wonder myself what will happen if there is, you know, another hurricane next year or this year.

**Couk:** Oh, if there’s another hurricane this season, all I can say is “Run.” (laughter) Everybody on the Gulf Coast, don’t goof around, get out and get out—as soon as you think it’s coming, leave. If it doesn’t come, guess what, you’re OK.

**Bunn:** Um-hum.

**Couk:** But if it does, enough people died this time, don’t need any more to die.

**Bunn:** Yeah, I talked to somebody else who said that a lot of the people, even like the Friday night before the hurricane they didn’t think it was going to be a big deal because they’d been through so many before where nothing happened.

**Couk:** Right.

**Bunn:** So.

**Couk:** Right, there was a lot of hurricane parties going on because everybody thought the same thing that we’ve been thinking for years and year and years, “Well, it’s not going to hit us. It hadn’t hit us, it’s not going to hit us.” And the couple that did come through, like, what was it—I was there on the levee at River Bend which is—not the apartments—in New Orleans River Bend at Cooter Browns and I was the only one that stayed there and watched that bar during—it was Charlie, maybe, I can’t remember the name of it, ’99 or something like that—no, I guess it would’ve been ’94. Anyway, that one was fairly bad but then again everybody thought it was nothing, just a lot of wind, and everybody became so complacent for so many years that that’s part of why so many people died in this one, “It’s just another storm, don’t worry about it.”

**Bunn:** Right.

**Couk:** People need to understand that, especially right now, we’re in a ten-year cycle that the storms are going to be a higher category, fours, fives, and people need to understand that it’s for real, it’s not just somebody saying, it’s not Noah predicting it, it’s a fact, you know. Twenty years ago was another ten-year cycle and those were some of the worst storms, and people just need to be aware of that. People get complacent way too easy, especially in New Orleans. (laughter) When you party all
day, twenty-four hours a day, you know, you tend to forget about the serious side of life till it slaps you in the face, or in the mouth.

**Bunn:** Right. (laughter) Ouch. All right.

**Couk:** Other than that, I’ll tell you I’m glad I wound up here. I could’ve wound up in so many other places. They actually sent some people from New Orleans to Alaska.

**Bunn:** Really?

**Couk:** I’d freeze to death in Alaska. I’m just now getting used to this cold weather.

**Bunn:** Yeah, I wondered about that because as cold as it was today, I wondered if it was going to be different for you, because my friend who moved from here to down there, she loves the cold weather and so now she’s down in Baton Rouge, and she hates it because it’s just so warm.

**Couk:** Always warm, yeah.

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Couk:** Yeah, it’s something to get used to, it really is. It’s going to take me this year for sure, of course, it’s my first year here, and then probably most of next year before I really start adjusting to it.

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Couk:** But I’ll adjust to it. Adapt and overcome, that’s all you can do. And keep your sense of humor.

**Bunn:** Of course. (laughter)

**Couk:** Without my sense of humor I probably wouldn’t have made it this far.

**Bunn:** Yeah. All right. Well, unless there’s anything else you’d like to add, I guess—

**Couk:** Everybody in South Carolina, thank you, thank you, thank you, just keep up the good work.

**Bunn:** All right.

(end of interview)