# **Chris Cenac, Sr. Interview**

Interviewers: Carl Brasseaux, Don Davis

Houma, Louisiana

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Don Davis: …by Louisiana Sea Grant to develop an oral history of the wetlands. We have not been told we have to look at A, B, C, D, and E.

Carl Brasseaux: Well, and understand we have no agenda– we're simply trying to record history of the wetlands.

Chris Cenac, Sr.: No, I understand. I mean I'm trying to understand.

D: And so here in Houma, Louisiana, we spent a lot of time with Louis Blum of Blum & Bergeron, and he provided…

S: Mr. Louis was um, a very close personal friend - um, I helped Tommy get his book going – we were very close. Mr. Louis's father, Tommy's grandfather, was my grandfather's closest friend.

D: Was – he, I don't …

S: They served on the town council together from 1933 to 1945, and they actually, when they did the estate of Pierre Cenac, they did it jointly with the Blums because they owned so much property together because they were all in the seafood business, and – next door to each other, across the bayou from each other - very close friends um, down four generations.

D: Well, and Louis has just been marvelous. And Louis opened the door…

S: Very um, talented also. He designed stuff – yeah.

D: Oh yes. He opened a channel we never thought about, and that's through the United Fruit Company. The United Fruit Company bringing bananas from Central America to New Orleans - had something to go the other way. We haven't found out the numbers, but there were barrels and barrels and barrels of dried shrimp, which they could rehydrate and add to rice, and it was high-protein, very nutritious element. So all of this is intertwined, and the reason we point that out is – Carl and I are close. We're not quite there yet – of having um, a text with photos and um, some video, but oral histories that we're going to condense and put in a kiosk, tentatively it will be in the library here in Houma. And people and others could come listen to that. Now our goal is to get ten or twelve of these.

B: But the kiosk idea – in fact there are kiosks like this throughout the country, and it's something that you could update monthly. So in other words, Sea Grant office in Baton Rouge – as we develop these different components or modules, for public consumption - it can be downloaded onto these machines

so we can start off with dried shrimp, and we can also contain, later, components for the oyster industry, for trapping, for cattle industry, all aspects of coastal life.

D: And right now, um, Carl and I are retired. So we are doing this just for the passion.

S: You're like me. Ever since I retired I'm working my butt off.

C: Ha ha.

D: Well you need to talk to my wife. She says something similar to that about me.

C: But you know, my father-in-law told me, and he warned me just before I retired, that he had never been as busy as when he retired. And fortunately that has proven to be prophetic.

S: That is very, very prophetic.

D: And, and then what Carl and I want to do in the next five months is we've got to go to foundations, and look for donations, into the LSU Foundation, that will allow us to buy the kiosks that will allow us – but the key – the key, Chris, is that if we – if we scan any photo in this book, now we're going to transfer that to a digital archive. Well Carl and I did the work of getting the photos. Behind the scenes is the full-time librarians who have to give, "this is from" – it could be "Chris Cenac", or you may want "Chris Cenac" and your wife's name and family.

S: Oh.

D: You understand?

S: Yeah, I know.

C: Well you see, he's up to his ears in it now.

S: Yeah, I know all that now.

D: So we – we are looking to underwrite the cost of a couple of graduate students. And we'll get it. It's just slow, meticulous. Right now we're here to interview.

S: You – you, I'll give you something. I don't' know how much you know about this, but it's one of the fascinating stories of dried shrimp industry in the thirties when – after World War I, and the restrictions on Germany, but Blum and Bergeron sent tons and tons of dried shrimp and ground shrimp peels to Germany so that they could get the Nitrogen out for munitions. And not too many people know that.

D: No, no.

S: But I know that. There's a fabulous story. And it was all under the table, you know, around the rule, and whatever. So it's industrial – it just goes to show you what certain people can do to, to be innovative, I guess is a good word.

D: Yeah, there's – I mean Louis Blum brought out a letter that was from one of his Chinese – he called him a supplier – he made him an employee. And was very nice, and very complimentary, and how much he enjoyed Louisiana. He named once on Louisiana and once on Terrebonne.

S: (laughs)

D: And the thing that's intriguing to us is that there was one book written about the Chinese in Louisiana. It's all related to plantations and agriculture. There's not even a sentence about the Chinese influence and the shrimp-drying business. And that's where we become very keen in talking to people who can relate these stories. So that's the project. It's a project that has no end, really. No beginning – it's finding someone to interview.

S: Well the problem you have – and I already know exists – is the people that you need to talk to are no longer here.

D: Yes.

S: That's problem number one. And that's why I did - started my project. Um, I was fortunate enough because my father was um, a surgeon, and we had a large family. And he was a general surgeon, meaning he did your eyes, he did your ears, he delivered your babies, he fixed your bones, and he did everything. Um, there were only two types of physicians - surgery physicians and non-surgeons. And he was the first um, board-certified surgeon in South Louisiana. And after World War II, Hill Burton funds became available, like the GI Bill, so that every community could have a community hospital to be on the – to build hospitals in the community, you had to have a certified surgeon, pathologist, anesthesiologist, and interns. So my father, because he was um, on the staff in general surgery at LSU, and he was head of colon-rectal surgery, and they wanted him to stay and be head of the chairman, head and chairman of the Department of Surgery, and he wanted to come home. So he had that relationship with the university, so um, the Ellenders had the Ellender Clinic here. But they – they were not really surgeons, if you will – board-certified at all. Sort of on the job trained, Dr. Willard had some surgical training. A little family clinic – the first hospital in Houma Dr. (inaudible) Parker had in 1928, '24 to '28. He left, and then around '28, '29, they had the Ellender Clinic. Excuse me – around '38, '39, the Ellender Clinic. But it was a little private clinic. So my father, with the help of board-certified physicians and the LSU staff, opened Terrebonne General Hospital, St. Joseph in Thibodaux, St. Anne in Raceland, Lady of the Sea in Galiano, and Lakewood in Morgan City. And every Saturday, he had to get in his car and go to different hospitals and sign all the charts because there were doctors practicing in those communities who were on the staff, but all the paperwork had to be signed by board-certified people. And he got um, Dr. Gordon (McHardy?) from (Brown-McHardy?) clinic, head of the internal medicine department at LSU, Dr. (inaudible), and physicians like that who were professors, to be on the visiting staff, and that's how they got around the board-certification issues. So my father had a great love for his community and his family, and he was talented in that he knew everybody. If you came to see him, he would sit down, "how you doing? How's Theresa's cousins?" And this and that, and everybody knew everybody. Houma was a small down. Very briefly, when I was – I went to LSU on an academic and athletic scholarship, so when I got to LSU in 1964 I had never paid for anything. I needed a shirt; I just

went to Dupont's. If I needed some shoes, I went to Sadies, whatever. I needed a tie – I would get my tie – that was it because we were a very small town. I didn't see my first hamburger till I was a sophomore in high school, 1960, '61 probably. Got to LSU, and um, my father had – he was head of the trust department at the bank, and my aunt, who just had her ninety fifth birthday, was head of the bookkeeping department. I had to go to the bank. They said, we're going to give you a checkbook. And you'll be able to write a check when you need some money at LSU in Baton Rouge. I said okay. So I um, of course, I played football, so I had an athletic scholarship. I didn't have to register for anything – I didn't have to pay for anything. So when I ran out of money, I realized I had to go write a check, so I went to (Bingo?) out on, um…

D: Nicholson.

S: Nicholson. And um, I gave my checkbook to the bartender – his name was Lonnie. I said, Lonnie, you've got to write a check. He said, why? I said, I'm out of money. I need some money. So he – he wrote my first check for me, the bartender at the bingo. It was a small town – it was a very small town. When I got to LSU, I thought the way those guys from Bunkie we were talking, I thought that was a big place. And they were very proud of that – Bunkie and Marksville and all that – I thought that must be a hell of a big place. (laughs) You know? Well until I finally went to Bunkie and Marksville and I said, well I'm from the big place!

(laughter)

S: Different kind of people, you know what I mean? Um, like they say they're a little brighter (inaudible) idea of what – Marksville was almost like Shreveport I guess. But um, so I inherited a lot of his um, enthusiasm for family history. And I realized, um, I have eight grandchildren now who have no concept at all – the oldest one is ten – her birthday is Sunday, on Halloween. Has no concept at all of where she's living. Her mother is from Atlanta, Georgia, who's a dentist. She really has no concept. She's been here for, you know, eight or ten years now. Went to LSU, became a dentist from Atlanta – living in Houma, Louisiana. Um, I finally just decided that if I did good and I'm the last member of the fourth generation, I'm probably the only one that still speaks French, that has the time – that has the finances to get this down. So that's why I started. And I really just wanted to get a genealogical-type situation. Because I told you that the original Pierre Cenac left and came here in 1860. It was a wilderness area. He – this was Jean Marie Dupont – um, who's from Beynac, France, which is very near Cenac and Lourdes and (Barbazan?) came and had a grocery store and a baker's shop – and since then I have the oldest picture of downtown Houma, 1866. It's the oldest known picture, pretty interesting. There were just, I believe, twenty four buildings in the whole community. Half of them were barrooms and doctor's and lawyer's offices. Ha ha, um, not too much else, but – and incidentally my Uncle Donald, who is ninety, told me that when he was a little boy, he used to walk to church, and on Main Street, there was a Chinese family that did all the laundry services. And I have never heard of a Chinese family at that time, now. This is 1900 in Houma, other than the people associated um, on the shrimp drying platform. And there are not too many in Houma – mostly in Barataria. (Jack Chung?) was here, he was here with the St. Martins, the St. Martins and the Blums – but that's the only Chinese person I know of in that era. He had – and then my Uncle Donald could tell you about it – he had a laundry on Main Street. But um, I lost my train of

thought somewhat, but I realize that if I didn't get it down, it was never going to get done. I had no idea at all the magnitude of the task that I had chosen to complete um, it was a ten-year stretch. We're just finishing ten years, and three trips to visit my family and friends, um, see I have a large family in France. I got a phone call yesterday from a cousin that found out about – and I spoke to her several times – who invited me to her eighty-fifth birthday party in Kansas City.  I had another cousin call me day before yesterday from another cousin in um, Phoenix, who sent me a picture of her grandmother. We have such a large extended family it's absolutely amazing. It's absolutely amazing.

B: Well while you're on the subject of your family in France, um, this is something um, I think is a general interest to people who study immigration in Louisiana, particularly because of foreign French here. It's such an important impact. How long did your family maintain contacts with relatives in, in the old country?

S: We have letters, and if you read the text…

B: Right, but I'm trying…

S: You're trying to get it on here? Okay. Um, well first of all, I think, and I did not realize at the time that I had probably in my possession – when I say me, well my family – we have in possession some things that most families never, would not possess today, including his two passports – his foreign passport, and – which allows him to go to a foreign country, the(*passeport entrevez?),* and his working visa so he could travel within the confines of France during the Napoleonic wars and practice his trade.

D: That was your dad?

S: My grand – my great-grandfather.

D: Your great-grandfather. Okay.

S: I have all of his passports and his visas. Every boarding pass – passenger lists. Um, pictures of vessels to Texas. Um, who was on board. Where – I have a picture of a port the same month – a Bordeaux that he left. Um, we have, not his, but a similar diary of the two-month journey to New Orleans. We have the weather of the day when he got to the mouth of the river – the Daily Crescent newspaper and the marine report. We have all the documents of the ship owned by the Wakeman family in New York City. I got that from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. - It's called an enrollment. Today we would call it a survey. Um, I have copies of the newspapers of the day. The - the three boats that were tied up at the mouth of the river, with them the captains of those vessels. The tug that went to get them – how long it took them to get to New Orleans, where they docked. He docked in Algiers at certain, um, dock, and I have that information. One of the other boats was across in the New Orleans side. But we have um, we have his documents of when he came to Terrebonne. I have all of his acquisitions and purchases. I have his naturalization papers. I have his wine glasses that he brought from France with the coat of arms. I have his birth certificate from France. I have photographs of all of the home sites – I stood on his home site. I visited with all my cousins in France. And I communicated with them regularly. Um, we – relative to France, my family lived very close to Lourdes. And if you read Franz Werfel's book, *Song of*

*Bernadette*, written in the 1940s, he talks about St. Bernadette, who was interviewed by the church hierarchy and the um, political hierarchy about her visions in this Seynac house in Lourdes. And the house is still there. My family members still um, volunteer there. Um, and it's pretty interesting that he grew up with St. Bernadette. He was born in '38; she was born in '42. And they lived a mile or so, two miles apart. And I think that, a few years later, we get close to the 1850s, when she had her visions, thousands and thousands of Europeans descended upon Lourdes. And I think for the first time, those peasants and high Pyreneans who were sort of isolated saw what was – there were other people coming. There were a lot of things going back and forth. And I think that's one of the things along with the um, (*oleon*?) the disease of the vines that decimated the grape industry, I think that's one of the things in combination with the war – if you take those three things that were a lot of incentive for the *francais estranges* to leave foreign French. It's still beyond me why somebody twenty-two years of age would get on a boat a hundred fifteen foot long and take two months to cross over to go somewhere he'd only heard about. And for odd reasons, he wound up in Louisiana, as you know, with um…

D: Do you have any – sometimes these are called immigrant letters?

S: Well we'll get to that. So he got here, okay. I was trying to answer his question first.

D: No, you're fine.

S: Yeah. So he got here, and the first letter we have, is his brother wrote to a friend in St. Charles parish. Have you seen his brother was Jean, Have you seen Jean Pierre? He says, I haven't seen him lately. Um, he – I've been told that he went into the country. Which obviously was Terrebonne and the Lafourche interior. And unfortunately, from that letter on, we don't have any evidence of – that we know there were communications because that information had been confirmed on the other side of the family and friends. They apparently knew more about us than – that was my biggest impression of it when I got to France for the first time, is that they knew more about us over here than we knew about them over there. Um, but from a physical standpoint, we don't have any other letters until he died. When he died, we do have confirmation that his youngest son, the thirteenth or the fourteen children, Denis, had his father's papers, which included his passports, his letters, his wine glasses, and correspondence with his brothers. We'd recovered all that but the letter. But we do know they existed. So - and that's another thing. Um, is his passport, um, which he obtained in 1858, you can see his um, he was illiterate because you could see his handwriting, which is somewhat unusual. Um, what also is of interest is that he came to French speaking in Louisiana obviously, with his (Basque?) origins, and was elected to the first school board in 1888, and we have a certificate signed by governor Murphy J. Foster, the recent governor's great-grandfather. He – and we have his, we have a lot of papers after he got here. But you can see he adapted and knew English, went to read and write, and his children were so schooled. Also, and that's an unusual thing for people from that heritage. Would you agree with me? Um, the other interesting story, if you look at the history of this particular individual – and others like him – his two brothers were in the service. Napoleon's service. He was drafted – we have his draft notice. We have his deferment letter, because he had two brothers in the service. Um, I have a letter written by the mayor of this town saying that he was of good character and not wanted for any problems when he applied for his passport. We have a letter written by the Prefecture Jerome – that's the sheriff of the area. In the Bordeaux area,

saying that he wasn't needed for military service, so he could get a passport. So we have all that. Um, and he left France during the war – Emperor Napoleon III's war, and set off for the United States. October 24, I think, 1860. And he landed at the mouth of the river, December 20, 1860. South Carolina seceded from the union, and four days later, Christmas Eve 1860, he got to New Orleans and they were having secession parades. And before he got to Houma around probably April of 1861, Louisiana became a sovereign nation and subsequently joined the confederacy in March. So he went from a, a Napoleonic War headed for the United States, wound up in Civil War, and when he died in 1914, seven of his boys were registered for service in World War I, and then twenty or so of his grandsons went back to France fighting World War I, and some got wounded. And I think that's a hell of a story. The other thing I think that's important is that these French people, and they were high mountain people, came to Louisiana and adapted high mountain snow-capped peaks to low lands, mosquitoes, snakes, alligators.

B: Studying contrast.

S: Etcetera and they adapted, and I think the French um, language was the common reason that they were able to get together and make plans and adapt over time, if you will. But they adapted, and changed with every one of the major events that occurred to the location down here, and they adapted initially from higher mountains to lowlands, and um, they carved out the wilderness. They settled the area. They raised their families, and they were sustenance people. They grew and raised everything that they ate and wore. Um, and as technology improved, they adapted to that. Um, they, they adapted to the beginning of the seafood industry as an economic backbone of this old southeast Louisiana with the technology of ice, electricity, light, engines, and they made that transfer from sail power to motor power, from local consumption of seafood to marketing seafood. Um, using the railroad, taking the technology that was developed in Baltimore in the 1850s, which originally came from France. And that's a fascinating story. Do you know the story of the cans?

D: We know a little bit of it, but please. Please.

S: Okay. Le Monde, M-O-N-D-E, is the big newspaper of the parish. Napoleon III had a very famous statement. "The army marches on its stomach." It's a rue statement. Wars in those days did not occur in winter – or battles I should say - did not occur in the winter. They occurred in the warm months when food was evident – was available. Um, so he said, you know, I can only go so far because I gotta feed my army. I need a way to bring food with me. So I can keep going and the other army can't. So Le Monde is insistent to put an ad out – I think for ten thousand francs for somebody to come up with a device that you can put food in that's good and edible, you can get this award. Well this guy came up with the idea of a can. So that's how they made the first can, and he won the award. It's made by hand. But they didn't quite have the – they didn't know about the – they knew about spoilage, but they didn't know how and why, and in the 1860s, Louis Pasteur came across the answer – pasteurization. And from that can, and heat and pasteurization process, and subsequently under pressure and a few other developments, they were able to can food and preserve it all in the interest of the military for the army to march on a full stomach. Well that fellow sold his – sold some of that information to a fellow from England – Kingston, I think, Kingsley? He went to New York – he brought the process to New York and

they were using – still made by hand, and then about 1860s, it wound up in the Baltimore, Chesapeake area, and they began to can corn and seafood – the first place in the United States that did that.

B: Well if I can interrupt you…

S: Sure.

B: I have a quick question for you with your medical background. These cans originally were soldered.

S: Right.

B: So what effect did the solder have on the can contents, the food contained in the cans?

I would think a deleterious effect. Not a metallurgic, but I don't think it was very good. Um, similar to lead poisoning today probably.

B: Okay. Well that's a question that – something that's never come up. And…

S: Well I don't think it would've been a good thing. Um, so the Chesapeake Estuary, um, (inaudible) if you will, um, they realized that all they had to do was go get the oysters and then put them in a can. Of course after the Civil War, they had rail in that area. We didn't have rail but they did. Um, they didn't have ice, they take ice from the Great Lakes, which I think is an interesting story too. There were actually ice barns here in Houma. Um, and they floated ice from the Great Lakes down the Mississippi River, and that guy became the first millionaire in the United States. The first industrial millionaire. That's a hell of a story, but of course in New Orleans with the first commercial production of ice in the 1860s and 1870s – they finally got that process going. So with ice and the westward expansion, the first fast food in the nation was the oyster, because you only had to pick it up – you didn't have to grow it. And you pick it up, and it's protein. And it was a – there was a spurge of the day. Oyster taverns and oyster saloons. And what was interesting with that – in the 1860s was when Tabasco started. And the McIlhenny family has some correspondence where they were promoting the use of Tabasco on the seafood so they sort of rode on the back of the oyster to get national recognition. And they promoted things like one drop, two drops, and what happened, and they have this documented – somebody put a cup, and put the oyster in the cup and ate it, and made the news because it blistered his tongue. So Tabasco rode the back of the oyster west. And the use of Tabasco and the invention of cocktail sauce was to hide the smell of the seafood – the further west you went, the less refrigeration you had. And I think that's a fabulous story too. So if you – if you look at the history of Tabasco, and you see how oysters got started, everything went great until the late 1880s when they started to have pollution problems on the east coast. Too many people were running out of seafood because they were not replanting the reefs – they were harvesting, but there was no um, what's the word I want to use? There was no, um, replenishment, in other words. The same thing happened in the south Louisiana – Plaquemines and St. Bernard. Um, at the same time, the oyster industry relegated just to New Orleans, they would go upriver and sell them in the city. There was no oyster industry south of New Orleans. Local consumption, no industry. No economy, if you will. So a person got sick in New York, and Chicago, they had Typhoid Mary. And typhoid is transmitted via unclean practices, and sewage and contaminated water, and so somebody said they

got typhoid fever from eating the wrong oyster, so it pretty much decimated the industry at that time. Some individuals in Baltimore saw that they were going – because of also the depleting resources, unwise harvesting practices, etcetera, they headed south to virgin territory, the Mississippi gulf coast, the Florida gulf coast, um, not so much Louisiana, at the time, and that's because we had no infrastructure – railroad, etcetera. And by the 1900s, the oyster industry had declined significantly in the Chesapeake Bay area. And the new fast food for the population – because it was a very populated – it was popular – Coney Island. So oyster saloons' popularity went down, and hot dogs went up. And that sort of ruined that whole industry. They moved here, gulf coast, eventually the Croatians in Plaquemines parish and St. Bernard had decimated the reefs on that side of the river. There was no active economy in west of the Mississippi River. I'm talking about fishing now. So they started coming over here. So that made them form the oyster commission, which is the forerunner of the present day Wildlife and Fisheries, and then before that, Conservation Department. They all – they were having oyster wars in the Chesapeake Bay, between Maryland, Virginia – they were having wars. There were actually boats and they had a Navy. Each state had a Navy to protect their reefs. They formed the oyster commission, and the first failed attempt to regulate the industry and protect the reefs was parish-wide, parish controlled. And that didn't work, so the state took over, and they actually built four gunboats, and thank you for the picture of one of those in your book, Don. And from – and they started protecting the reefs locally. And by that time, it was, I'll be right with you buddy. Um, by that time, the first incorporated seafood business that we know of south of New Orleans in this area was Houma Fish and Oyster, 1891. And that story is all documented in the book. Um, (Tofile? ) Cenac was I think the sixth child of the original Cenac children. Um, and his brothers and brothers-in-laws were all living in Dulac. Of course, Dulac in 1860, when Jean Pierre Cenac got to lower Lafourche, or what we call now Terrebonne, it was a wilderness area, and the majority of the people lived in Dulac, Louisiana. Of course that's the natural port. The largest community was in Dulac. The second largest was in Shriever and Gibson. Because in the 1850s, the railroad came through there. Caillouville, if you will, and Thibodauxville, Shriever. So Mr. Morgan had, of the Morgan Steamship Company, and his association with the Vanderbilts, had the steamships and the railroad. Um, there were a couple individuals in Morgan City that were harvesting oysters and putting them on the steamships, because you could ride the train from New Orleans to Morgan City – (inaudible). But you had to take the boat to Texas. So they were selling seafood, oysters in particular, because all you had to do was keep them wet. You didn't have to have any ice, and they were good for a few days. And the Cenac brothers were sailing with luggers, oysters from their reefs to sell in Morgan City. And buy goods from the end of the train – the end of the road at the end of the train. But you could get things in Morgan City that you can get in New Orleans without having to go to New Orleans. So they were bringing oysters to Morgan City, and then from Morgan City they'd come back with groceries in the store they had in Dulac. And (Tofile?) was um, actually eventually lived in Morgan City – bought property and married a girl from Morgan City – and when they decided to start Houma Fish and Oyster Company, there were twenty individ –sixteen individuals decided to start the seafood business. They started it in 1891. It went under in 1893 – they incorporated it. (Tofils) Cenac came in and took over, managed it, and put it on it's feet. and then by 1896 his brother, Jean Charles, um, started Sea Cenac and Company, and they jointly began what we consider the modern seafood business here in Terrebonne. Um, and it all started – they all started – they all started um, when there was a transition from sale to mechanization. We had refrigeration. We had electricity, and we had communication and

transportation - communication via telegraph on the railroad. Um, now the spur from Shriever to the outskirts of Houma occurred in 1872, so things were really just beginning. Actually I have a picture of the first phone page in Terrebonne, which includes numbers one, two, through eleven, twenty six I believe. Houma, Fish and Oyster was number three. Um, so the – all that came together at the turn of the century. And we had the wonderful resources on our coast. And to this day, it's still number one. And the brothers put together the backbone of the economy to come in Terrebonne and Lafourche and St. Mary, or southeast Louisiana, if you will. And up until the forties, the early forties, from 1900 to 1940, the backbone of the economy in this area was seafood - oysters initially. In the late twenties, with the advent of the seine and motor power – I mean, not the seine. The trawl and motor power, which really didn't get going until the early thirties, shrimp, and we had all the other associated things, moss, frogs, market hunting, the crab, crabmeat in the early 1900s - mostly in Morgan City, not so much in Terrebonne. There were seven or eight places where they were producing crabmeat in 1910 or so in St. Mary parish. This area rode the first forty years of the twentieth century on the back of the oyster and the shrimp.

B: Well while we're at that point, if I can ask a question. I'd like to ask a question at this point. Houma has some of the biggest canneries in the United States.

S: The biggest what?

B: Canneries.

S: Yes.

B: In the United States at this time. Was your family involved?

S: No. Okay my family was in the packing. Um, lake fishing and – no. Dr. (Descrimpsky?) had his um, lake oyster and - lake oyster – Lake Oyster Packing Company? I have to go look it up. I can't say it right now. Anyway it's right where the high-rise is on Bayou Terrebonne. Believe it or not, there's a well, if you talk about canning, remember, I said Baltimore, they had the can and they were the first people to do corn and seafood. And what that did, that meant that it was seasonal. So you had to adapt the process that you could work year-round. They had seafood in the winter and they had vegetables in the summer, and they brought that down here in the largest pumpkin canning facility in the world was right here in Houma. Dr. (Descrimpsky's). And I actually have wooden barges in Bayou Terrebonne full of pumpkins, right here in Houma. Um, the canning – the process is later on than we talking about packing and shipping fresh oysters. That was a little later. Um, and of course it goes hand in hand with the Bohemians, the ancient European people from the Baltimore area. We had over a thousand of those individuals working here in the canning business in the early 1900s. We were living here. Um, and that's documented. Um, the Cenac family were planters, packers, and shippers of the raw fish and seafood. We were not in the shrimp business. There was no shrimp business then when we started.

D: Tell me about – I'm going to interrupt just quickly. How many, to start, pre-mechanization luggers did the family have?

S: Ooh. I'll tell you what. Let's go off the record for a second.

B: Oh, yeah. Sure.

S: …have not read the manuscript. But let me tell you what I'm going to ask you to do for me. The manuscript is the best I could do to give a condensed version of all the things that I've just been showing you. And I'd love to talk into the thing for you – and I'll tell you all the stories I know. That's not a problem. But I think if you read the manuscript, you can get an idea of what you want to ask me.

D: Okay. Sure.

S: Is that fair enough?

D: Oh yes. Sure.

B: I have the manuscript – I'll forward it to him.

S: I mean don't you think the…

B: Oh yes. Absolutely.

D: Oh yeah.

S: I mean you – a question out of the dark. I mean I'm going to start going in this direction – I mean I can go on and on and on.

D: And you should. The more – and look at it this way. Um, you are the keeper of your family history.

S: I realize that.

D: You have eight grandchildren. Whatever is captured on tape that we provide for you, it only takes one of them to be able to listen and hear their family record. And that becomes very important.

B: And of course, the thing is they'll probably be forty years old before they…

D: Well listen – if you got Glen on tape, when he started in Houma, the family history. My Aunt Rita Mae in there. I have um, you can get it at the library. I have the separate one from my Aunt Rita Mae, my daddy's sister, who was also in historic, saving type stuff.

D: Let me interrupt just a moment. Carl and I have a handshake agreement with the library, and they are giving us, (inaudible), their tapes. We're taking them to LSU and taking the tapes and then putting them in digital format to protect the tapes.

S: That would be wonderful.

D: We're providing them back to the library just as a service. It's a slow process. Carl speaks French. We've still got to get some people…

S: And about two thirds of them are in French.

D: And that's been a bit of a problem.

S: It's hard to understand for me. By the way though, my patient – he's from France. Marcel, I see all the French speaking people down here too, because I know it's a lost thing. You know…

D: We're working with that collection, and it'll take us probably about ten months. We have some students that could transcribe the English.

B: Well, another thing too.

S: Her name is Rita Mae Hoffman – the Hoffman family from Thibodaux?

D: Johnny Hoffman.

S: Hoffman music?

D: Yeah.

S: The bank – Mr. Hoffman is president of the bank there. He's married to my Aunt Rita Mae, and she is 97 right now, but she has Alzheimer's now. But um…

B: Well, we learned some painful lessons back in 2005. We lost a wealth of artifacts and other historic documents, family collections, have just disappeared overnight. So that's why we're scrambling to – back to get as much as we can on tape or in digital form, and store it off-site in safer places. These are going to be in three - two university repositories and also hopefully in Washington, DC.

S: I – I told Carl, I started on this end, as a genealogical thing just to identify and put together some of my family artifacts. Um, Tommy bought me to see Cliff. And that's – and Tommy was pushing, pushing, pushing, I was actually sitting on the side of his bed when he died. I lost my best friend. Anyway, I was in – I had artificial shoulder replacement. I was in the hospital in Houston, and he called me from the hospital at Ochsner. He said, how you doing? I said, fine. I said, where are you? He said, I'm at the hospital at Ochsner's. I said what are you doing over there? He said, he said, my urine changed colors. My wife got upset so she brought me to the emergency room and they sent me here.

Claire (inaudible): Good Morning!

(background voice)

S: Don Davis.

D: I'm Don Davis. Good day.

C: Hi Dr. Davis. Claire (inaudible). Very nice to meet you.

S: And this is Carl Brasseaux.

C: Nice to meet you too.

D: Please have a seat.

C: Thank you.

S: And he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer while I was in the hospital in Houston. That's how close friends we were. But from that little undertaking, it has emerged into a monster, and as you know, we've been talking about it. And it has allowed – because of where I was in my life, and professional activities and I had time to do it, etcetera, etcetera. I never could've done this twenty years ago. And I want to do it, and it's done now, now that we're in the – we're just trying to preserve it, okay? And it's very, very important to me that it gets done – that's really my number one goal that I want to do in my life. Now, um, and I really want to participate with y'all to give you the benefit of all this stuff I got up here. This lady sitting here, because I have a story – I have it here, but I can't write it down, and you're talking about a coincidence. Jean Pierre Cenac married (inaudible) from here who was of Acadian origin. Predated their family, there's Spanish immigrants from Carondelet – on Grand Caillou and Little Caillou. She was number twelve of twelve children.

C: Pierre's wife.

S: Pierre's wife. And he married (inaudible), Claire's great-grandmother. No.

C: No. She was a um…

S: Her grandmother's sister?

C: She was an aunt to my Domingue  grandmother. She was a (Faulkey?)

S: No, no. we're cousins. But we went to high school together, and that's a picture of Claire.

C: Forty pounds ago.

S:  Go look at that, Carl. Read that last thing. Ya'll read that one, Don. That's a…

D: I can't. I've got to get where I can see.

S: Okay, yeah.

C: That one. Yeah.

B: Oh yeah.

C: Okay. That little corner picture.

S: Do y'all know Joe Broussard in Thibodaux – I mean in Lafayette?

S: Joe Broussard? The head of all catering at USL at the Cajun Dome.

C: This is what he's trying to point out to ya'll. That he was – I was the queen, and he was the captain of…

S: Captain…

C: …the court, and now he's all involved in that sort of thing.

S: Well Joe Broussard is one of our emeritus officers in the Washington crew. And he's married to a girl that went to school with us. And they live in Lafayette, so she dug all that up out of our high school yearbook.

C: Who's that?

S: Linda Benson.

C: Oh yeah, Linda. Okay.

S: That's me right here at the top corner at the Sugarbowl in 1964. So that was a few years ago too. But anyway, I have a story. I've been wanting to tell it. It's hard to get people to listen to you because I ain't interested in it. My wife is mad at me because says you ramble on and on and on and on. I have a lot to tell.

D: Don and I wouldn't know anything about that. ha ha.

C: Not familiar at all, are you?

D: Now, at this point, we'll be asking that question….

(inaudible)