Dorothy and Michael "Mike" Benge Interview

Interviewed by Don Davis

DD: Don Davis

DB: Dorothy Benge

MB: Michael Benge

DD: I caught one fish. My nephew fished it, pardon me, my son-in-law fished in the surf, caught 37.

DB: Oh my goodness.

DD: So I give you mine, so you can tell everybody he caught 38.

MB: The 25's will love it.

DD: There were two of us Dave, he was keeping some from me.

MB: Alright, okay.

DD: You know how that works.

MB: I caught about 20 on the fourth of July. Belle Pass.

DD: At the-

MB: At the rocks. And then Friday we couldn't get out at all, because of the weather. And Saturday we caught a handful and Sunday we caught a handful.

DD: Well, we went out Friday and we were right in the center. The storms were all around us and we caught a lot of catfish. And then my son-in-law was taking a catfish off a hook and it nailed him, so he had a hook in his finger. And that becomes a real problem. Had he gone to urgent care. We'd like first of all for you just to use your surname and last name and we'd to like to have your permission to record you. We'd also like that permission, for you to understand that this is going to be put in an archive for future researchers, students, concerned citizens and that we're planning on putting that in multiple servers. It'll be at LSU. LSU has what's called a digital library at National Sea Grant and it'll be at Sea Grant and then a back-up will be at ULL. And the object is to guarantee that if something went down we preserve the record. So we basically need first name, last name and agree and I'll start with your mother.

MB: Okay.

DB: Okay, my name is Dorothy Louise Benge and I give you permission to use whatever I have to say.

DD: Thank you.

MB: Robert Michael Benge, and I go by "Mike" and you also have my permission.

DD: I would first like to ask you that you're in a family business.

MB: Yes, but...

DB: In a way.

MB: This is a corporation.

DD: Sure.

MB: There are stock holders independent of the family. The family controls 53% of the stock roughly.

DD: And how long has your family been in this business?

MB: Since it started 1928.

DD: So we're in 90... Almost an 80-year-old company.

DB: Was it 1928 or...

MB: It was '27/'28 actually this... the Delacroix Corporation was the predecessor or the precesor or processor... successor of the Acme Land and Fur Corporation, which was a company that my great-grandfather, my mother's grandfather started. And actually it was the Southern Fur Company before that, so he was a fur buyer; owned a store down in Delacroix Island and through the trapper's war, which you undoubtedly heard of

DD: A little bit, but-

DB: That's how (inaudible) came to be.

DD: Feel free to talk about-

MB: That's really the basis of how the corporation started from the land side. The Delacroix Corporation I believe was already pretty much here, but then on the property, didn't own very much property. And the merger between the Acme Land and Fur and the Delacroix Corporation, which my great-grandfather sold the land that he had acquired to the Delacroix Corporation for money and for stock. And through the years we've managed to maintain the corporation. We've actually managed to do fairly, fairly well. I think my great-grandfather spent a lot of time if you look at the records of this corporation keeping this company afloat. He borrowed money to pay taxes. He always, you know, he invested heavily in the infrastructure borrowing gifts and the state and the Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes primarily but, uh, you know he struggled to keep the company afloat.

DD: What was your grandfather's-

MB: Manuel Malaro.

DD: Okay.

MB: Yes and he was a bootlegger. We were sort of proud of that.

DD: Yes and I think... I know the... there was some tension between the Malaro family and the Perez family and that's not a trivial matter.

DB: No and that tension lasted until just a few-

MB: 'Til recently. They pretty much buried the hatchet we think and I get along with both Chalin Perez Jr. and I get along with his half-brother Chalin and they don't get along but I get along with both of them. So we're better than that. I prefer to keep out with their relationship because I don't really... I know Chalin has a great deal of affection for his half-brother, but they are estranged through their family. But from the Delacroix Corporation's point of view, we shared a common boundary with Chalin Perez, Sr., and unfortunately we had to go to court and spend a lot of money to maintain-

DB: And it took 11 years.

MB: When that was finally settled. Finally settled about 5 years ago. Of course Chalin was dead and so we were stuck in a lawsuit with his widow or Lynn Perkins, Perez and Chalin and through mediation we were able to recoup some of our losses, but not all of them and established a boundary there was always supposed to be to begin with and move on and say that maybe as best you can this was a great misunderstanding between neighbors and let's be neighbors and go forward. I see Chalin in the CCA bank and I've sent some money for his (inaudible) for the Tulane Medial Research Facility. I think they do some cancer stuff so anyways we buried that hatchet. We moved along. But getting back to this corporation, when my great-grandfather died, my grandmother became president and you know she had been very, very active I think as the son of my great-grandfather never had, you know, being part of the business. She had came in and she made it a point that we were not gonna live hand to fist anymore, that we were going to set some reserves aside and she had a goal of setting aside about a million dollars in reserve, just to save. And I'll tell you this that when she became sick and my mother took over, there was more than that end reserves in this corporation. In addition, we had a great, great run of oil and gas activity through the years. We had great people working for us in the field. We were able to defend our property rights in suits like that or with the state even. We've got some great water-bottom case law. So it's one of those things I'll often hear people say. That's not true. You can say that if that's what you believe, but legally that's not the way it works.

DD: Well I wasn't aware of... I know the corporation, but I was not aware of the importance of women and I think in terms of gender studies and you certainly understand how the role of women has changed in the last half century. To have a corporation, and I'm guessing, under female management probably in the 50s or earlier-

MB and DB: 60s

DD: That's not insignificant. And it's a part of the story we never hear. So if you could just comment about the importance of how the female side of the family, for lack of a better word, helped this company prosper. I would really appreciate that.

DB: Well my grandfather died in 1962, and my mother was on the Board of Directors and then she was named president and, um, she I remember we came... we would come to read the minutes of the old past minutes that we could get a feel for what was going on, might go on, and uh she worked very hard, very diligently. She was committed I would say 100% to the job and, um, and then she just did a wonderful job.

DD: And this is without an MBA.

DB: This was a high school education. Now she did go to... she did a lot of continued education. She went to as many oil and gas seminars as she possibly could. She didn't have a degree and, um, so then when she became... when she decided to step down it was in '93

MB: She really didn't decide to step down. She, you know, was sick. She had a stroke.

DB: But she said "I'm retiring." She said it.

MB: She invited mom in ahead of time before that point and that's when she started reading the minutes and getting an understanding of the company and what's going on. When my grandmother became president, she had to... even though she was on the board; she had to learn the business. 'Cause there was nobody to say "Hey this is how we did it," 'cause my great-grandfather, even though she was on the board, and he did confide a bit in her I believe, she really didn't have a sense of the magnitude of the corporation, of the oil and gas deals. She did have a good attorney, the Wilkinson family has served this corporation for generations and so Hugh Wilkinson was an outstanding attorney. That makes a big-

DD: Let me interrupt a moment. You used the term "Wilkinson." Now there is a canal in Southwest Louisiana, coming off the west side of the river going through south towards Grand Isle called the Wilkinson Canal. Is that their family?

MB: I don't think so. They do trace their roots back to General James Wilkinson, the Revolutionary War. There are no New Orleans family in all the carnival, the secret societies, the daughters have been debutants and queens of Mardi Gras Balls, so uh that the point that he was very capable and he had a lot to do with helping her. But she worked hard to learn this business. She had nobody to fall back on. To see her kind of relinquish some of that control, because... and invite mom in to start learning and working to be the treasurer and unfortunately it wasn't very long after that that she suffered a stroke.

DB: I came to work here in 1989 and I came to learn the business and I was trained by Harold Baker who'd been with the company for years. He knew my grandfather and so he was the treasurer and that was to be my job, to learn his job, because he was wanting to retire for years and my mother wouldn't let him. (Laughs) So, it was a good time to come, and uh he was wonderful, you know, showed me what

I had to do with the books and what not and so that was in 1989. And in '93 that's when I became president.

DD: When you look at Louisiana's marshes, particularly during the period when muskrat was king, the best pelts either came from essentially Cameron and what was always called Delacroix.

DB: Yes.

DD: That is St. Bernard generally, a little bit of Plaquemines. So, you can address a period of time when fur was literally king in the wetlands. Prior to oil and gas in some ways more profitable than oysters, depending on the site to lease. Can you tell us any stories about that period?

MB: Absolutely.

DB: I remember I was in 8th grade at St. Rose de Lima and in our history book, Louisiana history book, talked about the muskrat industry in Louisiana. And I was so proud because I was part of that and it was always, it was the thing. That was one of the reasons that my grandfather was very committed to the trappers, the trapping, and the Isleño trappers. And that's one of the reasons that he did what he did with the corporation. In 1952 I think it was, they, the Delacroix board of directors did not want to lease land any more to the trappers, because they were making a lot of money with the oil and gas, and they felt like it was peddling. But my grandfather leased those lands from Delacroix and leased them to the trappers so they could continue to trap. So that was about 10 years that, uh, that happened. And of course you saw the fur industry change, especially when PETA came on the scene. And not only PETA, but the nutria just decimated the muskrat industry, because the nutria ate the grass that the muskrat ate and they not only ate the grass, they ate the roots, too. So, there was no feed and, uh, so anyway I've seen it from almost from the beginning that I remember until its demise. The fur industry-

MB: The corporation was started as I said Acme Land and Fur. This was the largest fur trapping ranch under single ownership in the North America.

DD: Really?

MB: It was considered to be the king ranch of nutria.

DB: No, muskrat, muskrat.

DD: I wanna go back a moment, because as a researcher interested in multiple things, your mom has pointed out something and I want to get a clarification. Clearly your grandfather, for lack of a better word, loved the people who worked his land.

DB: He did.

DD: So did he put, I don't wanna put words in your mouth, would you agree that he put the people ahead of his income sometimes?

DB: He did. He often did.

MB: This corporation, as he amassed the amount of property that he amassed with the fur trapper's war, he was paying the taxes on the property. People gave him the property to pay the taxes and they were able to, part of this corporation, to buy their property back if they so chose. Or they could work it themselves. Some people and you'll see if you look at our maps, you'll see that we have a lot of land. A lot of it is continuous, but a lot of it's broken up. And the broken up is where people bought their property back from the corporation for what they sold it for to begin with. Never a charge up or a markup.

DB: Never interest.

MB: You know, and as I said when we were taking about (inaudible)and paid the taxes well one time is 150,000 acres, but of course to pay the taxes sometimes you had to sell off property. And of course we sold off the less productive fur trapping property. That 50,000 acres turned into be the Morgan City Plaquemines Parish where all the oil and gas.... It turned out to be the much more profitable oil and gas section of the property even though we've been very blessed with the mineral rights that we have found. But going back to what you said about it, you know, he put those trappers first and towards the end, he was basically to his death from '59 to '62, he was basically bank rolling the trappers. He was losing money.

DD: So, would you call your grandfather-

MB: Great-grandfather.

DD: The first humanitarian of St. Bernard?

MB: I would think so.

DB: I would say so.

MB: It'd be biased. I would think that without a doubt, you know, the stories you still hear from Celestino, Núñez, Charlie's Diner every time to tell me about how he wanted. Why didn't you go to college? Manuel said he'd pay for college, but that's not really what he wanted. He wanted to go to work for Bass. You know and just things, stories like, lots of people...

DB: He put a lot of people through college.

MB: Just, you know, he took care of his people, no doubt about it. We still have (inaudible) as our quote on quote "land managers" running the job out there, but Donald still on the payroll still goes to work every day. Still has a great, great knowledge of this... His grandfather worked for my great-grandfather, you know, people don't leave us. Harold Baker wanted to retire.

DB: He wanted to (Laughs).

DD: If you had to put a number, it's going to be really hard, the number of people that your family going back to Mr. Manuel have touched. How many people would that be?

DB: Thousands.

DD: Okay I think-

MB: I'd say 500-600. There aren't that many families out there to begin with at one time-

DB: Well if you look at all the trappers' leases, that's a bunch right there. And then the family, you know, Lily's family, uh, cousins, you know. Now I will say this, that there is... this is a negative, there are some people in the parish who did not appreciate my grandfather, and I've gotta say, after looking through those leases and things, those that purchased, paid for their leases, they paid over 10 year period at trapping season so much and then in 10 years it was theirs. Some of them didn't take advantage of that and oil was discovered when all those leases that these people purchased. And those that didn't purchase them… kind of sour grapes. You know? That's why...

DD: It sounds to me like there's employment legacy. By that I mean-

DB: Absolutely.

DD: A grandfather gives this to his children. He gives it to his grandchildren. And those kinds of legacies are generally found in family run businesses. Is that true?

MB: I would say that's true. That would be very true here.

DD: And I've wondered, did the name Delacroix come from the community of Delacroix or did the community get the name from-

MB: As I said, we started out... he started out at Acme Land and Fur enjoying the merge with the Delacroix. I don't know if he was even on the board of the Delacroix Corporation.

DB: Yes, he always was.

DD: Now, we have fur. Walk me through... we capture fur and how we eventually get it to Steinberg whatever. What's the process, yeah, what's the process?

MB: Well, this building right here was a center. They would bring the furs here. One time the buyers did it and the buyers shipped it. When they started the Delacroix Corporation and the idea was to eliminate some of the middlemen and we became the buyer. They bought the furs here. They brought 'em upstairs. They sorted 'em. They graded ‘em; in some cases they even still dried 'em more. They shipped 'em to New York to be processed. So this was a complete operation.

DB: And the Delacroix buyers would go into the communities and they had a schedule and they would meet the trappers with their furs on the porches of the grocery stores, and you know in Delacroix in the area. And they would buy the furs there. The furs came bundled in bundles of 50 and they would go through 'em. They’d spread 'em out and negotiate a price. And rebundle 'em, bring 'em up here to the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th floors and that's when they would grade them. And we can take you up there. You can still see there’s remnants of that up there.

DD: Would you have a photograph of this building with fur in it?

DB: I don't think so.

MB: Don't think so, unfortunately.

DD: Well, you know-

DB: I've got the remnants. I've got the bins where they threw the-

DD: What we may wanna do is that Roy works with a lady who's a very fine photographer with the right kind of camera. I have searched federal records through huge files from St. Bernard. It will take me a while, but you will get a CD of every one of those images from that period, because the fur industry was huge.

MB: The fur trapper was the wildcatter of his day. In the 20s, during the Depression, I think you talked about this in your last book. He was making money.

DD: He was making a good living.

DB: He was selling furs for $1/pelt and in those days that was a lot of money.

DD: Yeah, I'd like for you to talk a minute about that because in my case, my roots are in Oklahoma. My father went from Oklahoma in the 30s to California, because he got a 60% raise. He went from $5/day to $8/day and you're talking $1/pelt.

DB: In the 1920s.

MB: The trappers probably catching 200 pelts a day.

DD: Yeah, it is a part of our history that you can comment on and we appreciate that, because it's been forgotten and it's not insignificant. Now, did you have any sort of buildings in Delacroix where you would keep fur?

DB: No, the buyers would meet the trappers, as I said, on the porches of businesses down there and bring 'em here.

DD: So, you were using probably a model 8 truck and delivering 'em. Now how did the flood of 1927, because this company-

DB: Oh god.

DD: How did that affect what we're talking about?

DB: Well-

MB: That was Acme Land and Fur.

DB: It was Acme Land and Fur

MB: And, uh, the muskrat season was completely shot when that happened.

DB: Now let me tell you something. Okay, Mr. Wilkinson was my grandfather's... Hugh Wilkinson Sr. was my grandfather's attorney. And he negotiated a deal with the state to, um, for a settlement, because they were gonna blow up the levee at Caernarvon. And this was going to kill the business; the fur trade. And so he negotiated a deal with the state. I think he got to get money to cover the loss for the company. What my grandfather did with the money was to buy barges and he sent his trappers out to collect muskrat pairs, put them in cages on the barges and fed them until the grass… It was, the water was gone and it was safe to let 'em loose again. Is he something or is he something?

DD: This is why we're here. I don't know that one. So he bought and then used the word plural, so there's more than one barges-

DB: Well, I mean-

MB: Barges and grain.

DB: Barges and grains. So anyway, then you know, and he helped a lot of people, you know. The city was supposed to pay reparations and they didn't and, um, you know a lot of 'em just, you know, relocated. They had to go to New Orleans. And my grandfather helped a lot of those people. The ones who needed it or asked, they got it from him. So, he didn't really make a million dollars on that deal. He spent it to save the industry.

DD: Now, there's gonna be an overlap. We've got a significant trapping. We've seen the introduction of the nutria. There has to be a point where oil and gas come into the question.

MB: 1939

DD: So right at the end of-

MB: '38, '39

DD: Right at the end of what some would call the Great Depression and just before WW2. Now do you remember the company that put the first well in?

MB: Texas Company

DB: Texas.

MB: Sid Richardson.

DB: Sid Richardson. He's on the wall over there with Eisenhower.

DD: Alright.

MB: Forerunner of the Bass Company. Now the Texas Company was not with Sid… well maybe 'cause Texas Company had everything at one time. Sid Richardson had his fingers in everything. And then he broke off in the Bass field. That was the second field. That was still producing today.

DD: Is there a Bass company?

MB: It's... they're now called bass, oil production company, but they have gone from _ bass, the Richardson and Bass to Perry R. Bass Inc. to Bass Enterprises to... They have changed their name several times.

DD: The reason I ask is that during Katrina, there were a series of tanks owned by a company that was called Bass. Is that the same?

MB: Probably so. That's probably why they changed their name; liabilities.

DD: In terms of oil leases, win or lose oil company W.T. Burton, LL&E, Texaco; Texaco eventually got state water bottoms largely because of Huey Long. But during this period, Huey Long was elected in 1928, took office in '29, died in '34, so right before you're talking about, there was a not a lot of electricity. There were no paved roads. The communities were isolated. There was no sewage. There was no municipal water. Do you remember how that changed? Or stories about it?

MB: All I can remember is Uncle Steven running into a mule and running his truck into Bayou Terreboeuf.

DB: In the middle of the road. (Laughs)

DD: You see, when you go out to (inaudible), there was a railroad there at one time.

DB: Yes, there was.

DD: Okay, if you can remember any stories about the railroad?

DB: I really can't. I know it was there.

DD: Okay.

DB: And I know as a child we would go to visit relatives in Delacroix Island and I can remember it was such a long trip. Oh god, it took forever. And it was a gravel road, a shell road. And it seemed like it took forever, like 3 hours or something like that. And it was a narrow road and the bayou on the side of the road, Bayou Terreboeuf was beautiful. It was flowing all the way from Chalmette all the way to wherever all the way to Delacroix Island to Lake Leary. It was just beautiful. And then, I don't remember who was in office, but they allowed people to build mud bridges across that bayou and put a culvert underneath 'em. And if you go there today and look at Bayou Terreboeuf, it's not a bayou. It's a mess.

DD: Now do you remember Alluvial City?

DB: Yes. We go down there to visit friends, family.

DD: Well, I have a favor to ask. There was a post office in Alluvial City. If you might have any letter that is postmarked Alluvial City, I'll buy everybody dinner. It's been recorded. 'Cause it's brutally difficult.

DB: Okay, I'm gonna put you in touch with someone who wrote a little monograph for Alluvial City.

DD: Okay.

DB: Uh, her name is Maria Schnitzer. Maria Fernandez Schnitzer. And her father was Frank Fernandez and they lived in Alluvial City. And her father is the one who did the oral histories at Nunez. So if there's anybody would have anything like that, it'd be her.

DD: Well we went and interviewed the Roban family and I asked the question and they said "You're sitting in Alluvial City." And they have some photography and it's on my to-do list in August or September, because you clearly have Isleño characteristics and I know you're very proud of that and you should be. If we could just talk a little bit about your Isleño heritage or someone say Canarias.

DB: Canarias.

DD: Canarias heritage. We'd appreciate that because it's not well documented.

MB: I thought it was better documented.

DB: It's getting better. It's getting better. We're improving.

DD: But you know what I mean.

DB: Yeah, I know. We've forgotten pages of American history.

MB: And I would say this, it's more prevalent now I mean at least in the New Orleans area, people know who the Isleños are.

DB: More and more. And just this week in the Louisiana magazine on the cover there's a picture and it talks about new restaurants and at the very top of the list is the word “Isleños.” Isleños cooking, Borgne restaurant is one of the top five new restaurants and Brian Landry who was partner with John Besh in that restaurant opened that restaurant. Besh sent Brain Landry and his sous chef Gerry Middleton with us Canarias, to the Canary Islands for 15 days and we researched Canarian food. And they have it in their restaurant. Not totally, but some of the things. They were responsible for importing Ron Miel, which is honey rum drink from Arucas on Gran Canaria. And it's really good. They serve it in their restaurant. You can get it down at the Meraux Quik Stop in St. Bernard. Started out as $25/bottle and it went up to $30, because he said there's such a demand for it he can’t keep it on the shelves. So, you know, they imported cheese form the Canary Islands, wine, so we're making progress. We've been at it for a while and uh-

MB: It's in Louisiana history books.

DB: It's in Louisiana history books now. It wasn't in that 8th grade book when I was in 8th grade.

DD: And I ask the question because it is expanding. I was, well we were, in the Isleño historic center when you were getting ready to go on that trip and that's exciting. We'd still like to come down and try to do some interviews, but when you think of St. Bernard, you think of Plaquemines; you think of your property, you gotta have a boat. Alright. I think what we need to do is set the stage here that those people buying fur probably use a boat and I wanna know was it made of wood?

DB: Yes.

DD: Was it locally produced?

DB: Yes.

DD: Sail power. Was it used, motor? A lot of 'em used originally, at that period, a model 8 or they may have even used a Model T with a flywheel , which break your hand. Can you just give us a little background on what you remember about the boats?

MB: All I can remember is what I've seen in the pictures.

DB: I can remember Lightening and the Delacroix. Those are the names of the boats. Uncle Pete used to maintain 'em.

MB: With cabins.

DD: So, like an oyster lugger?

MB: Well, built on that, but smaller 'cause they used 'em to patrol. The Lightening and the Delacroix were two motor boats that Mr. Adam used to patrol the property. And they were in board boats with inboard engines that my great-grandfather in 1954 he bought a 28 foot Chris-Craft for his personal use. Inch and a half plank (inaudible) 455's. Talk about a very, very nice boat. My grandmother sold it to somebody.

DD: Now, on your property, particularly, and I don't know where your property ends and the Biloxi Marsh sort of-

MB: Uh over, towards where the (inaudible) is now. That would be more the transition as we move east of Delacroix Island we start to break up. The Biloxi Marsh is primarily on the other side of (Both talking at once). They do have some south of Hopedale and they also have a company called Lake Eugene that's they're a part of so they've got some land.

DD: So, they're neighbors?

MB: Right. There's different little sections all over the place. We have some property all the way out in Biloxi Marsh, but not very much.

DD: If you go from Shell Beach due East, I am told that the Arch Diocese of New Orleans had, for lack of a better term, a camp. A retreat center, and there was also apparently a boat builder out there. Do you know any stories about either one?

MB: There used to be a place called the Priest Camp.

DD: That would be it.

MB: And it was on Lake (inaudible) if I'm not mistaken. It was out on the lake, the Priest Camp. I've heard the reference to that. The people I've heard say it are all deceased. E.T. Tapper talked about the priest camp. Uh, there used to be... The arch diocese used to have a camp. All this time I thought it was somebody by the last name "Priest." (Laughs)

DD: I think what it says if we can nail it down a little bit is we are very familiar with individual families or maybe a corporation owning a camp. But to have the Arch Diocese, for lack of a better term, using it as R&R. That's an important part of this story.

MB: You might check with FJ Campo, Blackie's son.

DD: His son? At Shell Beach?

MB: Robbie would probably have heard the story, but Robbie's younger than I am so I mean. But FJ, you know, he would probably know about it or even (inaudible), but he's not down there anymore. Those would be two that... I'm trying to think who else would be down there. When we lost Blackie Campo … We have a great video deposition of him somewhere that he was talking about. We had an issue with Biloxi Marsh on some property and so we were having a case. We meant to settle but in the preparations we went to Blackie Campo as an authority

DB: Oh gosh.

MB: Now who's who and who was what. What was kosher out there at the time.

DB: I wonder if we could get a copy of that.

MB: There's gotta be a copy somewhere here.

DD: Anything that you find that you care to share, those are really valuable in this sense. I'm an eternal optimist. I need you to know that. But if we can't save all the marsh, these stories, only one generation from now, one generation removed from a family where my dad made $5/day. For just one generation. So, those become important historical documents that we don't even think about today. And we're here to try to not only capture the stories. I'm looking for a Steinberg Fur Letterhead.

DB: We might have one in a file somewhere. I'm sure we do. I know there's one there.

DD: The community of Delacroix, Hopedale, Yscloskey, uh there's another one that's... that are just forgotten.

DB: Reggio. Bencheque. Reggio was originally called Bencheque. And that was the second settlement in St. Bernard for the Isleños. It, um, it was named Bencheque originally by the original Isleños who settled there. And it was a corruption of the word "Benchijigua," who was a Guanches king on Gran Canaria.

And then it later became called Reggio after the Reggio families. She was, the lady was a very giving person and took care of a lot of the Isleños too.

DD: Well here's something I want you to think about, we have a Harper's Weekly dated 1886/87 showing the community of Saint Malo on Bayou Saint Malo. That community: gone. Can you think of any other communities that we may not know of that are gone? Now we've said a certain one has been rebranded, renamed that are gone and this might be a community of five families.

MB: Well at Oak River in Orange Bayou had an Indian village. Even today, the bones are washing out of the sinkage.

DD: Really?

MB: So uh, every time there's a project you've gotta have the historical society or government's historical agents go out there and check for bones and artifacts and whatever. So there's probably a lot of documentation but I do know that one of the banks of Orange Bayou and Oak River-

DB: That's Orange Bayou coming into-

DB: It would be on this bank right here in the middle right there. This would be Orange Bayou, this would be Oak River.

DD: Really?

DB: And my grandfather had a camp. Bass. Sid Richardson built a camp for my grandfather on Oak River where Orange Bayou came into it. And um, it was a big camp and across the bayou, across the river, Oak River, there was a camp built by Edwin Powell. He used to lease it to the people who worked for Bass. And, uh, but that camp was a big camp that was wonderful and Betsy took it in 1965.

DD: Now do you have any property that's near the delta? The Mississippi River Delta?

MB: No, we don't really get below Oak River.

DD: Now do you have leases, I mean hunting leases, on your land?

MB: Yes.

DD: So you have actually-

MB: About 135.

DD: Individual hunting leases. Wow. Are these like hunting clubs or is it just-

MB: Individuals clubs. Groups. Just depends on what they, you know-

DB: How big the lease is.

MB: We actually put down on paper, the leases. We had 66.

DD: Now when was the first one of these leases?

DB: I'm gonna talk about that. The first lease-

MB: I'm gonna get a drink. You want a cup of coffee?

DD: No, I'm happy. Thank you.

DB: The first leases were handshakes and that continued until I became president and I said well you know, we gotta have written leases, because we've gotta secure the property for one thing. We've got to be able to settle disputes over leases so in '93 I instigated written hunting leases. And everybody was thrilled, 'cause it gave them a sense of security as well, because the lease was theirs and it said on the lease where they were gonna hunt and they got a map and everything. Everyone except Chalin and Perez signed a lease. And that was in 1993. And that's how we ended up in court, because he didn't want to sign a lease and he was... He thought well I can pull the wool over this little girl's eyes and so we went back and forth and then I had in my file a note, 'cause Adam and (inaudible) used to call in his reports to the office.

MB: Adam Mallory,

DB: Adam Mallory used to call, phone in his reports after he viewed the property; after he made his rounds, and the secretary would type what he said and date it and put it in a file. And uh, what's that?

MB: The leases.

DB: So anyway, it was dated 1963 and we were in 19... Was that in 1963? So, it was 1993 and it was like November of that year. And I figured that Chalin was going for 30 years possession to keep that. So, in June, and I filed a suit, because I had to do it under that 30 years. And it took 11 years to get a judgment and then it took another, what 5 or 6 years to get the settlement. 'Cause we won the suit after going through the-

MB: And they appealed the court of appeals. And they had a couple of judges die during the process, so we had to keep pushing back. We had to do it again. In other words, once a judge died on the panel, you had to start over. So we did that, and finally. So anyway, we won. And um the... before I filed the suit in June, I met with Chalin and I made one mistake. I didn't take somebody with me. I met alone, but it turned out okay in the end, because when I met with him, I had my points written down, what I wanted to cover and I specified Chalin, my Board of Directors, is concerned that are you are going for 30 years acquisitive prescription. He says "Oh no, no way" So, when I get on the ferry, I have my notes that I wanted to talk to him about and I wrote a letter to him based on what we had discussed and asked him would he please review the interview and either approve it or add to it, correct it, or what. And so he read it and he approved it, but in that interview he said he was not going to... he had no idea of acquisitive prescription. And so that right there stopped the acquisitive prescription for possession. And that, when we went to court the first time, Judge Roe, who was the judge and who Chalin and Lynn sent his wife to law school. His wife was their secretary. They sent him to law school, and he wouldn't allow

that in his evidence. Wouldn't allow it in his evidence, but the attorney proffered it, so when we went to appeal on the last time, the third time we went to appeal with a new panel, they nailed him.

DD: 11 to 16 years roughly.

DB: Yeah.

DD: Wow.

DB: Perseverance. I got that from my grandfather.

DD: Determination.

DB: And my mother. They were both very determined.

MB: We're getting ready to renew leases-

DB: August.

MB: Duck hunting season.

DD: One of the things that Sea Grant has been involved in, it based on faculty, we have somebody who interests Don we do Don. Is that the recreation potential of the wetlands is largely unappreciated by the non-hunter.

MB: Non-hunter.

DB: Right.

DD: Now, clearly this is a very important part of the business. It may not be important in generating income.

DB: It does generate income.

MB: It doesn't generate enough income to run this corporation.

DD: That aside, if I used the term "Purdy firearms" you might know it.

MB and DB: Purdy firearms?

DD: Purdy. P-U-R-D-Y. Purdy shotguns, in my opinion, are the most expensive shotgun manufacturer. I know three in Louisiana, and I haven't gone looking for them, and I don't know if they were bought as new or on a secondary market. I can't answer that question. My wife and I were on holiday in London last year. She's very understanding about my quirks. I go to the Purdy firearms company and introduce myself. And I said "can you show me your records?" And they said "sure." I'd like to know every Purdy firearms sold in Louisiana, but I don't need a name. I just need to know a sale. "Sir, we have those records, but they're not digital. They're in a file that took up about 50 or 60 inches of shelf space." I said

"Okay, I'll take some photographs." "Well sure, just don't take a picture of a person." So there's two of 'em there and I take a picture and I go home. Retail value, just short of $100,000 a firearm.

DB: Oh my god.

DD: Now, having found three without looking, the researcher in me goes "how many more?" And the point is, there's a group of people that recognize the hunting value and in fact some of the land ownership was originally set aside prior to oil and gas for hunters largely out of Chicago. So, I think that's part of the story that's never been told. Now, since you have this real estate, did you ever have market hunters?

DB: Market hunters? You mean people shooting to sell?

DD: Yes.

DB: Oh yes, definitely. Way back when, when it was legal.

DD: When it was legal. That's one of the things that the Isleños did to supplement income you know-

MB: As you look at the history of duck hunting in the corporation, the duck hunting as it evolved was done more by the market hunters in New Orleans in the early days thinking shoot 'em and taking those ducks to the French Market to sell. It wasn't a sporting issue, duck hunting in the early days when it's not like this.

DD: No, this is just me looking at the data.

MB: What you really had problems with back then is more of your trappers that were supplementing their income with the ducks. And, uh, Gerry Alfonso... Talk about, you know, getting those French ducks and getting them down to the French Market.

DB: And some of the hunters would take orders. People would say well I want 12 French duck, 12 teals, you know?

DD: A finer French duck.

MB: Quacks. Quacks. Anything that quacks.

DD: Okay. Okay.

MB: A lot of French ducks. Quack. The pintails aren't French ducks. The mallard. The model duck.

DD: Now, have you ever heard the use of a punt gun?

MB: Yes.

DD: In Louisiana?

MB: I can't say I have heard it in Louisiana. I have heard it.

DD: You do know what it is.

MB: Yes. I don't know that they've actually used those here, but I can't say that I know that they've used that here.

DD: I've only heard one reference that they may have been used here.

MB: I don't-

DD: A punt gun is basically a cannon.

DB: Oh.

MB: Well it shoots out a lot. You look at the development of ... Go back to the... my great-grandfather had the lease that my brother and I use today maybe it's even bigger than that then because, but here people like to hunt. And that was... the oil and gas interest or just people who worked on the house or somebody who-

DB: His doctor, his doctor.

MB: You know. So, and they would have you know spots where they would... but they didn't lease it, they didn't pay anything for it. They just went and hunted it. There was that little element. The rest of it was pretty much market hunters. We didn't really have a lot of duck leases. And I think it was pretty much after he died that we really started, Mr. Adams started leasing out the ponds to... and that's where we got 66.

DB: Friends. You know, people who... Isleños, people who lived down there. Sports, who wanted to hunt, and Mr. Adams did the negotiating and the leasing, but it was only a handshake.

MB: Almost $200-$300.

DB: There was nothing written, and when I came on, I felt that that could be dangerous, so-

MB: It was worse than that so when Donald took over, he was leasing the same times to two different people because he-

DB: He didn't know.

MB: He, well, he said that's not what I told him. The guy says he's been hunting there for 20 years. Mr. Adams put him there. Now you don't need that much. That's not how we're gonna do things. We're gonna make sure that when we give our word, we're gonna stand behind it. Now that's why we've now got (inaudible). People say that in a lease now there's a map that's got the areas marked off. They've got better maps than that now. Now we've digitalized 'em, we know exactly how many... You can see the difference in this pond. Back here to this map. Look how this has all opened up.

DD: Yes, yes. Now, if we're talking about market hunting, we need a decoy. We sometimes call it folk art or hatchet art. Were there Isleño families?

DB: Absolutely, absolutely. All the Isleños in the beginning made their own decoys. They made their own decoys. We have several examples in the museum and they were crude looking, but the ducks didn't know any better. And they worked very well. And then as time went on, it became a folk art and they were more realistic, more polished, more beautiful, and we just had an exhibit. "Ducks to Decoys and Decimas" at the Ducros museum. [Referring to the Louis Alfred Ducros Museum and Research Library in St. Bernard, LA] And we had a wonderful collection of decoys from all over. We had some from Tennessee. They were originally New Orleans, but the guy lives in Tennessee and he gave us three of his ducks to leave in the museum. So, it was, we had over I guess it was over 50 or 60 exhibits. And we even had a cardboard decoy, 'cause at one time they sold these cardboard decoys and Henry Rodriguez had one left. So, we had that in the exhibit, too. And it was great, it really was.

DD: Well, Mikey brought up something that maybe you'd like to comment on just a tad. Go ahead, you were about to say something.

MB: You asked me about the decoys. I know at the turn of the... in the early days, they hunted wooden decoys. I don't know if carved 'em. Jerry Alfonso's dad carved. I mean those were all the old carvers. Brain Cheramie cut off the rose area. He actually wrote a book a while back "Ducks, decoys and lures, legends"... something like that [referring to *Louisiana Lures & Legends: The Decoy Collection of Brain Cheramie*] . Anyway he focused on Southeast. The carvers who carve for the hunt, not to decorate. Give him a $10,000 retainer and a year and a half from now you'll get a duck. With along with another $15,000.

DD: Is that (inaudible)?

MB: That's his son. So but you know, we had a great, great history of decoys. Those right there are Cal King's decoys. A couple years ago I bought myself 18 decoys. We used 'em the first season. I break 'em out once or twice, but most of the time that stay upstairs in the bag. But, the point was, I was going to an auction somewhere there were auctioning off these working decoys and this was in so and so string of working decoys and it sells for $9,000, $900, $1,100. I said, you know, if I bought a set, maybe one day they'd be worth something. Working set of decoys they actually hunted over.

DD: That's not insignificant.

MB: It's a great, you know it's a great... Those two right there are Jerry Alfonso, who used to work for this company. And the one up there with that's Dale Bordelon who's deceased now.

DB: And he was a world champion duck carver.

MB: And I've got, on the second floor in our conference room there I've got a pretty good set of, a lot of Cal Kings, but a few other of the local... You can take all the Cal Kings that I have on my shelf, put a string and weight over it and hunt on it. They all float, but I paid too much for those. (Laughs) I got stuck with 'em. They said they sold 'em for $1,000. Oh yeah Mike Benge bought 'em. I paid $900, I didn't pay $1000.

DD: That's just gorgeous.

DB: It looks like the feathers were retouched.

MB: That is wood, that is wood.

DD: That's just gorgeous.

MB: Bordelon did that.

DD: Again, this is the sequential development from-

MB: From the working decoy to the duck.

DD: Yeah, from a subsistence based economy to something more wage based. I wanted to go back, you mentioned, and I think you're right, that when the trapper's season was over, they also hunted. Well, where does the oystermen fit into this story?

MB: I don't know to be totally honest with you. Most of the oyster leases that I ever was familiar with were not oyster leases, they were oil and gas hold-up leases. And that was one of the things in our water bottom suits that we had to deal with, you know, because the state was leasing our water bottoms to oyster fishermen. We were in turn, holding up the oil and gas companies from drilling on our property. And so uh, even though we won that, the state still continues to lease those water bottoms whenever we the oil and gas don't worry about them. They don't have a leg to stand on. We've already got the title from the courts that we own the water bottom, so then they may have a lease from the state. That's their problem, you know.

DD: You know, one of the things that both of you can comment about... and we should at least touch this, how hurricanes in particular has reshaped, and I mean not just from the landscape, but people's attitudes? And you go back to Betsy; you can actually go back before that, you can look at Camille.

DB: 1947 storm I was a senior in high school.

DD: And in 1915 storm played an enormous role in how New Orleans looked.

DB: Oh the 1915 storm, I have a story about that. That was one of my bedtime stories that my grandmother used to tell. I lived on Esplanade Avenue. It was August and it was very hot. And she would sit in her rocking chair with a fan. I would be in bed laying down and she would tell me stories and fan me 'til I got to sleep. She was a wonderful person, and one of her favorite stories was the 1915 storm. She said that in those days, there was no warning. There was no warning and so she said that my grandfather had gone, taken stuff to the French Market, so he wasn't there and she was at the... they had a grocery store in Delacroix Island. And she was at the grocery store with the two children. My mother was 5. My aunt was 3. And she said the weather got bad and the water was coming up. And her brother had a fishing boat and he came by the store to get her and the kids. And she told him, I don't wanna leave, because Manuel won't know where I am when he comes back. And he, my brother, told her "If you don't leave, he won't know where you are, because you'll be dead. You've got to come with me. You've got to get on the boat." Well, in the meantime, and he had a big boat, shrimping boat, and a

lot of people had gathered on the porch, because it was elevated and the water was coming up. And so she said, well I can't leave all these people here, you know, I'm not gonna leave without all these people. And he looked at her and shook his head, because she was a very, you know, when she set her mind to something, that was it. And he said, “Okay, put 'em in the boat. Let's go.” And so they got everybody in the boat and as they pulled away, the store collapsed. The store collapsed as they pulled away. And they went out as the Isleños still do. They go out in the boat and tie up, usually in the trees and ride out the storm. And she said it was terrible, because the snakes were in the trees, because they were getting away from the water too and they were just dropping into the boat. And everybody, when they dropped, they were stunned, and we would just pick 'em up and throw 'em overboard. Get rid of 'em and her brother told her, “You know, if we hadn't had all those people in the boat, we might not have made it.”

DD: Wow.

DB: So, um, that was one of my bedtime stories.

DD: Betsy had to play a real critical role in your company population at Delacroix.

DB: It did, but it didn't-

MB: It was, you know, it was a big, big event for the moment. But let's face it, everything kind of paled in comparison to what happened in Katrina.

DB: Oh yes.

MD: You had the lower 9th ward flooded.

(Both talking at once)

MB: Went there, for Katrina. It never floods. You know, so that was, to me, after Betsy we still had houses in St. Bernard Parish that were habitable and unaffected. You had, of course, the (inaudible) in the lower 9th ward and all that but still after Katrina I think there were maybe 7 houses that were habitable.

DB: Only 7 out of I think there were 27,000 houses and businesses in St. Bernard Parish and I think there were only 5 that were left standing. That were not devastated by the storm.

DD: It was about 8 months ago, Roy and I interviewed the Roban family. And they said that 11 families had moved back to Delacroix.

MB: That's what I'm hearing, too. One of my employee's parents lived down there. They moved out, you know, they still have the house. They still have a raised house down there, but they’re not officially residents down there. So it’s more of a weekend camp getaway, but I thought 8 but 11 could be right. It's not very many people who lived there on a permanent basis. One guy who does he's not even local down there.

DD: Well, I bring this up because I think it's fair to say in terms of resiliency when you look at not just the Isleño community, but others, it's tattooed to their soul. So how can you explain that they're terribly resilient and home is not 5 miles up the bayou? How do you explain that?

MB: I think that's what… We can't get him to leave during a hurricane. He rode out Katrina at our field office. Actually he went to the pump house, 'cause it was raised. Our field office had about a foot and a half of water, because a lot of these are from Scarsdale. He just-

DB: He's not gonna leave.

MB: He feels that if he leaves-

DB: I don't know what he feels.

MB: He needs to be there for when the storm stops to check his boats, to help people. You know, he does not evacuate. Thank goodness. He rebuilt his house down in Davant after Katrina and he rode the storm out down there for Isaac and thank goodness because we had 9 feet of water at our field office at Scarsdale for Isaac. So-

DD: Now Mike, I know where Davant is. I have no idea where Scarsdale is.

MD: Right below the Belle Chasse Ferry. On the east side.

DB: You get off the ferry and it's the first turn in.

DD: Now, when you look at Lake Leary and you look between the western arm of Lake Leary, because it makes a sort of... And you go west of the river; the whole series of canals that look like that could have been a land reclamation project at one time.

MB: Uh, yes, it was. Caernarvon district.

DD: Really? Now do you ever remember a piece of real estate called Promise Land?

DB: Oh yes.

DD: Explain that to me.

MB: Well the Promise Land is on our property. That's all I've ever known it is as Promise Land, but it does come from the rivers, the Promise Land. They had a Promise Land Academy. That school down there.

DB: Leander Perez started the Promise Land Academy when segregation was an issue and it, I've always heard of Promise Land. We have a duck lease, a duck area and it's called Promise Land.

MB: I always thought that was because they drilled the well and it was dry that's where that name came from.

DB: It was before that.

MB: There is an area up on the highway area called Promise Land on the river highway and-

DD: I think it goes back to a land reclamation project. I think it goes back to maybe to the Wisner states. I don't know. And then there's another piece.

DB: (inaudible) might know the history of Promise Land.

DD: If you go to Yscloskey in Hopedale and you go due east, there's another area out there that's got a whole rectangular set of canals and the only reason I can think of that... there are two reasons 1) it's a land reclamation project for maybe oranges at one time or 2) it's a muskrat ranch. And I have no record of either, but this is not oil and gas. No. This is either trapping, which I don't think. I tend to think it's a land reclamation project at a time period which we've lost the records.

MB: Well, the Caernarvon district that you were referring back to was a land reclamation project and unfortunately when they blew the levee in 1927, they blew the Caernarvon reclamation project. But it did actually go to one phase of completion. Dredged what they call the outer canal. They had the pumping station in there. There's still remnants of that pumping station out there if you know what to look for. And they had some lateral canals and they had some canals that were dug and then there was a bigger picture for a stage 2 that was going to go even further into the marsh, probably all the way into Lake Leary. But that never happened.

DD: How hard is it to find a pump station? Do you need a boat?

MB: You gotta have a boat.

DD: Now, what keeps the population so glued to the land on Terreboeuf?

DB: It's in their blood. It's just; it's a part of 'em.

DD: Is it fair to say it's home?

DB: It's home. It's home.

MB: I think Blackie Campo said the same thing. I said look I was in Metairie and I was miserable. I couldn't wait to get back down there to Shell Beach. You know fish fuel tanks out of the marsh, clean them out with a garden hose. Well how do you clean 'em. (Laughs) Don't tell us that. Nevermind, forget we asked the question. He was backed up selling diesel to the shrimpers who were backed up catching shrimp after Katrina, you know. It's just their way of life. It's what they know. They know the boats. They know the water. They know shrimping. They know crabbing. They know the oysters, you know. That's what they do.

DD: And when did your family first settle this area?

DB: Well, our ancestors came over from the Canary Islands on... in 1778. And they settled, they were settled in St. Bernard village, where the museum is today. That's where that group of settlers from the Canary Islands settled. There were other settlers who settled around Gonzales and-

MB: New Iberia.

DB: But that wasn't Isleños. They were from Mali. And they were earlier. But the Isleños were settled in four areas around the city to protect the city from British Invasion. That was their purpose. And the only settlement to really survive intact and maintain its cultural identity is the one in St. Bernard.

DD: So, is it fair to say that it's mathematics; it's only rough 11 generations?

DB: I guess. I don't know.

MB: The family. The company.

DD: No, no, the family.

DB: The family.

DD: And what percent of those 11 generations lived within 30 miles of the original site?

MB: All of 'em.

DB: Yeah. And really until WW2. It really wasn't until after WW2 that the Isleños began to assimilate into New Orleans and because of the training they had received in the military, then they could get jobs in the city and many of them still had jobs in the city and in the parish, you know.

MB: My great-grandfather was one of the first to leave because he got employed to buy a house on Esplanade Avenue.

DB: That was after the 1915 storm. He put the two girls in Holy Angels Academy and he bought, well they rented first, and I think they built the house on Esplanade in 1927.

DD: Wow. Now the tough one. Michael, I assume you have some children. Do you want your kids to live here?

MB: Do I want them to stay? I do, absolutely.

DB: Absolutely.

MB: And they did. My oldest daughter's a lawyer. My youngest daughter is at LSU. I have a feeling she'll stay somewhere close to home.

DD: I think it's again going back to this resiliency. This whole concept of, yeah I understand the importance of having your parents and grandparents. I didn't have that, because my background is worse than shotgun shells. So, I've had to learn that you want your children, grandchildren, maybe even your great-grandchildren... I mean, when we have a family get together, there are three generations and I'm the Patriarch of that group and you want to continue whatever the traditions are. And I don't know that we can find many places in this country. That's a true statement. So we articulate that and somebody in Boise, Idaho listens to this, they're going to be somewhat surprised. Now, we've been

doing this for an hour and a half and I know this from other things, I do want to talk about rum running, but maybe we need to do that another day. Would that be fair, 'cause I understand the importance of being in the outdoors. Right. No, no, and we would love to come back.

MB: Oh absolutely.

DD: You now know the kind of things we're interested in. If you would have like… I don't want a copy of a confidential document, but if you have one that's not signed, with no checkering or anything.

MB: I'll give you that too.

DD: We can just make a copy. This is an example. We don't wanna be a pest. We would like to be a guest. What is this 204?

DB: 206.

DD: And come down and if you find imagery or anything you think is unimportant, show us. And let me explain why and then it's time to go. When I was putting together the book "Washed Away," I was really interested in the canning business. We really don't have enough information. And I found an oyster can and I just wanted to get it and photograph it. Well I did counter bid and there's only so much nickels in my nickel book. I got up to about $125 and I figured my wife would not be real happy with me spending that for an old can.

(Laughing)

DD: It sold for $2,275. Now it takes two people, so even an old can. Again we don't want the original, so let us get a photograph of it, because the art work was incredible. The company is still here in Louisiana, although their headquarters has moved to Altanta. I'm going to try to go to Atlanta on just a cold call and try to visit and see if they may have… I don't want the originals. And if they're worried about copyright, I'll do it in black and white, because it gives you the name of a place. And I'll give you an example. There was a place called Dunbar, LA. It was actually Dunbar-Lopez & Dukate Seafood Company. And I'm a geographer. I'm supposed to know. I couldn't find it. Another place called Lookout. Couldn't find it. About 3 weeks ago, I got a little upset with myself. Well if you go to the post office, you can find out if they had postal records. Well, Lookout went from 1896-1915. Dunbar went from 1916-1930 and I go "It's gotta be the same site." I found a map. I found it. Now, the only way I knew that place was there is 'cause of the can. The can said canned at Dunbar. Gotcha. So anything you think is not important, it could be real important, because what we find is what's common to you, the rest of the world doesn't know. And that's what we're trying to do. And I think I speak for Roy, we really appreciate you for doing this and we will get back to rum-running. I have some questions.

DB: Brian Gowland did his dissertation at Southeastern on the trapper's war. He gave me a copy and in fact we were supposed to meet the day Katrina hit to go over pictures so we could publish it. In other words, he would let us publish it and we could sell it as funds for the museum.

DD: Really?

DB: And uh, I've got to get back to him before something happens to him or me so we can get that done.

DD: Well, I think, I can't say for sure, but we may have some capability of putting it in a digital format. We'll have to discuss this, it may be a possibility. If that would help. There are things we can do and I like to remind people that the biggest bureaucracy in Louisiana is not state government, it's LSU.

DB: It's LSU (Laughs) Okay.

DD: Okay?

DB: Alright, sounds good.