

Dot Benge Interview

Interviewed by Don Davis and Carl Brasseaux

Carl: As Don may have told you Ms. Dot, we don't have a political agenda. Our only interest is in preserving the intellectual or the living memory of a community for future generations. We've been doing that for all of the coastal communities from the Sabine to the Pearl. And so we very much appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and with other members of your community out her, it's a real privilege.

Dot: Well you know, we are the last living vestige of Spanish Louisiana and we are very proud of that.

C: Right, as you should be.

Don: Well let me start by getting you to give us your name and also your permission to record this. The materials that are going to be generated by these interviews, they are all going to be digitized and transcribed and then they're going to be put in the archives at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette, at LSU, and at Louisiana Sea Grant and probably, ultimately at the National Sea Grant office in Washington where they will hopefully be used by researchers but now or in the future to help interpret umm you know, coastal issues, and studied by people from this point forward. So, do we have your permission to record the interview?

Dot: Absolutely. Do you want my name?

C: Well if you can begin by giving us your name and we'll take it from there.

Dot: I am Dorothy Louise Atouille Benge. And I do give my permission to do with what you will, with this interview.

C: Alright, well thank you. Thank you. Now could you tell us a little bit about your personal ties to the community here, explain your community in St. Bernard.

Dot: Well, it goes back a long time. My grandfather, my grandparents were born in St. Bernard. The Islanian Museum is their last home in the parish of St. Bernard. It was their Domisile(?) always. And umm, they lived on Esclanade Avenue, but this is where my grandfather voted, this is where his heart was, this is where his business was.

C: Okay now, you speak of your grandfather, is this man Manuel Molero?

Dot: Manuel Molero, yes.

C: Ughh, he was a larger than, one of the larger than life figures in the history of St.Lan.. ughh Bernard parish.

Dot: He was.

C: Tell us a little bit about him.

Dot: Well, first of all, I think he was the most wonderful man that ever lived. He was very good. He was intelligent. If you read the "Rising Tide", John Barry gave him credit for just doing all kind of wonderful things, barreling money. He ugh, Barry said that he was illiterate and I corrected John after he wrote the book. He was not illiterate. He was uneducated. He had a sixth grade education, and he, when it came time to come to the rescue of the Islanios in the early 20's, 1920's with the trapper's war, and he ended up having to purchase the lands from the state because of the trapper's war. They couldn't get people, they couldn't get outsiders to trap it anymore. And umm, he went to the bank, he borrowed money to purchase the lands from the people who had bought them from the state.

C: Okay, well what I'd like to do now is just take one step back and talk a little bit about Manuel's parents, the circumstances under which he grew up here in the parish. And then we'll talk about the situation in the marshes leading up to the trapper's war.

Dot: Okay. He umm, he was one of 6 children, he was not the oldest. He was orphaned at around 12, 13 years old. Umm, he used to work for a Jewish gentleman who had a truck. And he would come down to the parish and purchase produce and chickens and seafood and stuff like that and go to the french market to sell it. And my grandfather was as a 13 year old, was his helper. He did very well. The Jewish man liked him so much, he wanted to adopt him. And, my grandfather said no, he had his brothers and sisters to take care of, and he did. So he went with the man and he learned how the man did it, and he said, "I can do that, if I buy a truck I can do that." So he bought a truck.

C: Now, about what time period are we talking about here?

Dot: Well let's see, ughh the trapper's war was in the 20's.

C: Right, 26 I think.

Dot: 26. I think my grandfather was born in 1880 umm I don't know, I'd have to go look at the cemetery to see exactly. But he was born in the late 80's like 1880's. And umm, he was just..

C: So he would've been roughly...

Dot: About, maybe he was 20 years old when he did this.

C: Okay, so roughly about the time of World War I.

Dot: Yeah. And umm, his brother by the way did fight in World War I. I think it was his younger brother. Cus his older brother was Uncle Steven. Uncle Steve was a character, but anyway, he umm.. Where was I? He eventually he purchased a truck and he went to all these lineal people down here and said I will buy you produce and I won't charge you as much, so that's how he went into the truck business, the truck farming business. And as you know, as time went on ugh he saw things that he could improve on, and he always did that. So he eventually you know, he and his brother Tony, the youngest brother, opened a grocery store down in Delecraw Island they were in partners. And of course the grocery store was an outcome of the truck farming that he did.

C: Right.

Dot: So the umm, during the early 1920's ughh trapping was a way of life for the Islanios and the state owned the lands and they didn't have any leases or anything. They just went out and staked a claim of where they were gonna trap for the season and it was from November to ughh February was the trapping season. They lived in the marsh, my uncle Tony had the store, and they would go out and you know, bring groceries. Take orders and bring groceries and of course, those in the camp, they lived off the land, they hunted, they'd fish, they shot ducks, they did whatever they had to do.

C: Were they involved at all in the purchase and distribution of pelts, or were they...

Dot: Yeah, that was, that didn't come about until after the trapper's war.

C: Okay, okay. So at this point, their simply providing provisions to the trapper's in the (inaudible)?

Dot: Yeah, yes. And umm then, in the early 20's I guess maybe 22, 23, 24 it was the trapper's war. Trapping became very profitable. And, the Perez's saw that as an opportunity and so they first, I think they first, they leased the lands from the state. Then head the trappers, lease the lands from them. And that was okay, you know, people understood that. You know, okay. So we'll pay to trap and umm and they did. But, they had to buy all of their equipment from the company you know it reminds me of the Tennessee Ernie Ford, "I owe my life to the company

store." Well it was like that, it got to be like that. And, so anyway, I think they complained. They went to my grandfather for help. And so there was some court cases, you can see them, you know and they are on the books, and it was some court cases about the lands. And so anyway, the Islanio trappers were cut out completely because they complained about having to you know, not making any money! And I mean and it was very profitable, they were getting a dollar a pelt, which in those days you know, if they collected 200 pelts in a day that was big money. And, but they weren't, they weren't making it. So anyway, my grandfather, they came to my grandfather and asked him what he could do to help. So he had his attorney, Hugh Wilkinson Sr. no Jr., No Hugh Wilkinson Sr., was his attorney. And Hugh had gotten him out of jail. They met; he bailed my grandfather out of jail on a Christmas Eve I think for bootlegging. So they became lifelong friends and Hugh became the attorney for Delecraw Corporation, which came out of this trapper's war. So anyway, he umm, so they went to court, they had you know, they had arguments back and forth and then none day, well they, the Islanios, weren't trapping anymore. So they had imported Texas rangers and people from Cajun country to come and trap the lands. So one day, these people, Perez's people, it wasn't Leander himself, although he was involved, he was there attorney and it was his cousin John who had the lands. And so one day they're sitting around, these Texas rangers and these Cajuns, and they said let's go down to Delecraw Island and make Spanish soup. So they loaded a gatlin gun on one of the boats and they came down through Lake Lerrivere to where it comes in to Delecraw Island. And umm, there's arguments on both sides as to who shot the first shot, but anyway, my grandfather got wind of it, and so he alerted everybody and so the men sent the women and the children in the back out of line of fire and they lined up along the highway behind things to be ready for them with guns. Anyway, the shooting began and Sam Gowland was the guy, he was an Islanio who owned the boat, but he was a Perez Islanio. He was killed. And the boat, I think, I'm not sure if the boat was sunk or not I don't quite remember. I wasn't there, but I read about it. And so anyway, he was killed and so they all scattered. So Perez faction called the governor's office and asked them to come and declare martial war. The governor, I can't recall who he is right now, O. K. Allen, or I don't know which one, but anyway, he came down to the parish himself personally. And by the time he got down here everything was calm and women were back in the houses and whatnot. So he called off the sheriff and told him he better take care of his own business down here and there wasn't anything he was gonna do or could do. So, that was that. Then, they couldn't get anybody to trap the lands that they had leased from the state after that. So, my grandfather purchased the lands from the Perez, John Perez. So he purchased the lands. He didn't have money to do that. He went to the canal bank and he borrowed the money. And he pledged, now at this time 1924, he pledged future oil royalties which was incredible in those days. You know? So, that's how Delecraw Corporation, actually, it was Acme Land and Fur first. That's how that came about. And then Acme and Land and Fur became Delecraw Corporation when Delecraw came into being. And umm, I think it was in the 1930's. And then they, they purchased the lands from Acme and then they continued the fur business. And that was upstairs at Delecraw Corporation

where they would bring the furs in, put 'em upstairs, grade 'em, sort 'em, bail 'em, and send 'em to New York.

C: Were there specific firms in New York served as the principle buyers?

Dot: Yes. Yes. I don't recall, I don't know who. I probably have you know, I probably have records upstairs at the office cus I don't think they throw anything away. But umm, and those old records, I mean I've researched those old records for different things many times. And they've come so in handy for lawsuits that we have had.

C: Well, if any of these questions...If you feel fatigued, please say, we'll stop, or if any of the questions you find...

Dot: Offensive?

C: Well, offensive or if you're uncomfortable or any of them make you uncomfortable, then please tell me and we'll stop. The 20's was really a golden age for the trapping industry, because of the muskrat craze.

Dot: It was. It was.

C: So, the uhhh, what's your dad, I mean your grandfather made the purchases. The community must have gone through some period of prosperity I would think. At least for the rest of the decade until the crash occurred.

Dot: Oh yes. Yes. Yes.

C: Can you, I know you weren't there, do you have any handed down stories about the economic impact of the craze on the area.

Dot: It.. It was, well it was wonderful. I mean you know, there was like I said, they were selling skins for a dollar a skin and if you caught 200 rats in a day, \$200 a day was big money. It's big money today actually. But it was really good. And so it was a very prosperous time.

C: Well it was, they... many of them also supplemented their income with rum running.

Dot: Yes, yes that was another thing. Yes.

C: Now, one of the unique things about the situation in St. Bernard is that the Spanish linguistic ability here made it a natural, recepticol for rum coming out of Cuba.

Dot: Cuba, yes.

C: Right, and do you have any handed down tails about that?

Dot: Umm, I, there was an elderly lady that belonged to the society, her name was Emily Vaga. And she used to tell us about her dad was a rum runner and she used to tell us about ughh, and he evidently worked for my grandfather, and she used to tell us about how he would bring in the barrels. And they'd be in a wagon. And they'd be taking 'em to town. And they'd cover the wagons with quilts and stuff and sit the kids on top of the barrels. (laughter). And drive into the French market.

C: Do you know if this year old tradition here in the caded all whether or not the... ughh some of the barrels, some of the liquor was stored in the camps temporarily before...

Dot: I really don't know but I would imagine that that occurred. She said they had a barn and tat's where you know, they loaded the liquor from.

C: Okay, well it's an important chapter in Louisiana's 20th century history and one in which unfortunately is very difficult to write about. Simply because there's only one side of the story and the documentation and that is in the federal archives.

Dot: Yeah. (laughter) Well yeah. In our house I have a friend, Burdesto Esteves. His grandfather was a sheriff. And he was shot at the Violet Canal Bridge. He and his, another.. a surpass. And Esteves and the surpass deputies were shot by rum runners. Wasn't my grandfather's rum runners, cus he didn't do that. You know, the Perez's were also in that business too. And they're not very nice people. I shouldn't say that but you know, history speaks for itself.

C: Yes it does. Now you're dad eventually, I mean your grandfather eventually became involved in politics?

Dot: Yes. In the early 40's. He ran for sheriff twice I believe, and umm he didn't win. You can't win against the Perez's. But anyway, he ran for sheriff and in 1947 was the last time he ran for sheriff. And he ughh, I'll never forget, it was election day; I was 13 years old. He got a call that they were stealing votes in Arabi in the first ward. So he took, I was in the bedroom when he answered the phone. And he went to his dresser and he got a gun, a pistol, and he got the shofar to drive him down to the first ward. I was all excited, I called my aunt and I said we just gotta go, we gotta follow him, because if we're there, he's not going to shoot anybody. (laughter). And so, we took a cab and we went down there and umm, and you know how they used to when the commissioners would open the ballot boxes they would read the name and pass it on and the next one would read the name. They voted Clara Beaux, and I mean she was, I think she was already dead, much less being.. not living in Arabi. But umm

C: Well Charlie Chapan and Babe Ruth were supposedly other roles in Plaquemine Parish so... (inaudible, multiple speakers).

Dot: Well, I'm sure. I'm sure after witnessing that you know? And ughh, so anyway, he didn't shoot anybody, but I guess they stopped, but he didn't win the election. In fact, they voted more people in that pre-sync that were registered there and that's you know, that's a fact.

C: Well, if we can, I'd like to back up a bit to the early 30's, we talked a good bit about the 20's, the stock market crash comes in 29, and how did that effect your family and the parish and it's also roughly about the time that our exploration begins takeoff, so if you could wrap all of that together.

Dot: I know that, I know that the depression hurt everybody. I know my mother used to talk about crawling on the floor looking for 7 cents for my dad to take the bus to go to the docks to get on the ships, and umm that was when they lived on Esclanade Ave. So I know everybody was hurting then. But somehow my grandfather managed you know, he held on to the lands. He had bought a lot of property. He owned the Medical Ox building at one time, and he actually sold that to pay the taxes on the land. He was always, always wanted to keep the land, and so you know, he sold a lot of stuff a lot of times to do that.

C: That shows the value he placed on his native area.

Dot: Yes, and also the people who trapped it, the Islanios. It was their livelihood. And not only his, but theirs as well. And so, I know that he did that, because I mean I heard those stories so many times, and you know, I'd go to the Medical Ox Building across living on Petania, and just you know, well my grandpa used to own this you know. He was always doing that. So he kept on, he held on to the lands to the better end. So umm, where was I? But anyway, he managed.

C: He, the family store remained open?

Dot: Well, my grandfather sold out to my uncle, his brother, and he maintained that. He did that. As a child, as a young kid, I used to go visit down in Delecraw Island. My grandfather's brother had 5 children, and they were around my age, and I would go down there and stay. I remember Evangeline and I used to fill the orders for the umm.. to take out to the marsh. You know we'd get the brown boxes and you know so and so and write their name on it and fill the order. So that went on a long time.

C: Now, he passed away in the...

Dot: 1962.

C: Okay.

Dot: February the 23rd, 1962

C: That's quite a full life.

Dot: Yes. He was only 72 years old. But he lived a lot in those 72 years and I think he had a premonition, because I had a doctor's appointment at you know in the Tureaud area, and he was in Tureaud Hospital. I went to see him, I think I had an 11 o'clock appointment. I got to his room about 10 and talked to him. In fact, it was the day that Allen Shepherd went up.

C: Oh sure!

Dot: I brought a little t.v. for him to watch and he told me he he he just kinda talked like you know, "Now I want you," you know, "your mother is gonna be in charge when I'm gone. But I want you to be behind your mother." And he said, "and I also want you to promise me something... that you will take care of Mabel and James after your mother's gone." That was his, that was my mother's sister and her son. And her son is umm, bipolar, paranoid schizophrenic. He's a hand full. But anyway, I promised. And I'm still doing it today. He can't stand me, he hates me, but I still, he's living the way he is living because I'm keeping a promise to my grandfather. Then the other thing he said was ughh, "now one day I want you to be ready to step into your mother's shoes." I was you know, I went to Tulane, I took business administration for 2 years. Hated it, hated accounting, just hated it. But you know I liked English and stuff like that, but I did it. So then I got married after I was, after my sophomore year and umm started raising a family. He told me again, "now you go on, you do your life, but remember when it's time, where you belong." And so I did that. And that's been my life. You know, and I just, I loved him so much because he never, you know, he never, he never insisted that I do what he wanna do. He just wanted me to be ready if I could and would, and so I did that. And then he died in '62, my mother became president. She was on the board of directors already, and she became president in '62, and I helped her, you know? In other words, I went with her to you know, we went through the files and we were like going crazy cus we didn't know what was going on. She didn't, even

though she was on the board, she didn't know. So my cousin ET and I we went with her and we, you know, we looked in the files and learned what we had to do, then I left. She didn't need me anymore, and she really didn't want me you know, she really didn't want me. You know, like we'd go, she'd make an appointment with some business and she'd get me to drive her there and I wouldn't even get invited to go in. So I said to hell with this I got better things I can do you know she doesn't need me, and when she needs me I'll be there. And that's what I did. Then in 1989 she'd had a stroke. I used to go with her to play bingo and she would work 20 cards like nothing, unbelievable these little dots all over the place, and I mean I had a hard time paying attention to 2. So then after she had her stroke we would go and she only did 1 card. She was you know, so she said, she came to me one day and she said, "I'm ready to step down," but I had already in 1989 I went to work, she wasn't president then. She didn't step down 'til '93. But in '89, I could see that she was slowing down and so I called her one day, I was teaching school. My husband and I had a private school until '85 we sold it. And Jimmy Carter came in and just ruined the economy, and umm we sold the school. And so I called my mother and I said, "I'm ready, do you need me?" And Harold Baker was the treasurer for the company and he'd been trying to retire for years and she wouldn't let him. So, you know, I said I'm ready if you want me I'm ready. So she said "well maybe you can come in and learn Harold's job." So I did that and Harold was wonderful, and he was so glad to get me (laughter), cus he was in his late 70's and he was ready to call it quits. So I went in, he taught me his job and I made him write notes of how to transfer stock and how to do this or how to maintain the lease books and stuff like that, and how to color the maps you know, and so it was wonderful. I loved it. Then in '93 she said I'm ready to step down as president. That's when she'd had, you know, she'd had her strokes before that. So she asked the board of directors, she told the board, she didn't ask 'em, she told them we had 52% of the stocks so it didn't matter, so she told them at a board meeting that she was gunna step down and that she wanted me to take her place. Well, it didn't go over well with the board. They really, I mean I had a tough job. So ughh but anyway, we pushed it through and I got to be president and I had to really earn my, earn my way. You know, cus they didn't, they didn't think this is just a kid that's you know a Molero. So anyway, we had the umm, they had a meeting at Wilkinson's office. Now Buddy Wilkinson always supported me, he did, but he knew me more better than the others did. And the rest of 'em you know, saw me at board meetings when they all, when they dropped in the office, they really didn't know me, but Buddy did and Buddy was thrilled to have me. In fact, I have a, I have a note that his wife sent me after he died that he had written to her.

Lady walks in.. Dot and Lady exchange a few words. Lady leaves to see Bill.

Dot: So anyway, he supported me, and so we had a meeting in his office, and they all.. I said, "Now look, I want to know what you're thinking, I want you to tell me what you're thinking, I want it all out on the table, and I will answer any questions you want. So we did that. Boy they

were just, they were brutal. It was terrible, but I got through it. Then we had the Perez then in 1963, I mean '93, we had, I had this problem with Perez, Leanne ughh Shalon Perez. And umm, wanting to take over the land behind his Stella Plantation, and he had had a gentleman's agreement with my grandfather, a handshake, about leasing.. being able to use the land behind Stella for hunting. Well I had a note in the file. Like I told you, they kept really good you know, there were these memos. The land manager Adam Melarin used to phone in when he'd go around the property, ughh what do they call it? Just patrolling the property. Whatever he saw he would phone into the office, the secretary would type it up, date it, and put it in this little memo file. So I had memo files coming out of my ears and I, when I had gone with my mother looking at all this stuff I knew where to find all this stuff. And there was one dated 1963 December the 23rd, no June 6th, June 6th 1963. I think it was that. I think that was it. But anyway, I knew that I only had 30, he had 30 years and that would be his. So, I called him, I tried to you know... Oh and another thing I did when I became president, there were no written hunting leases, none. There was only a handshake, And I said, "In this day and age we can't have that, we've gotta have leases." So we developed a hunting lease and I notified everybody who hunted on Delecraw that we were gonna have hunting leases where police come in and sign. Everybody was thrilled because with the hunting lease we gave them a plat so they knew exactly where their area was, and umm how much it was gonna cost them, and that nobody else was going to be able to take it away from them. So everybody loved it except Shalon Perez. He dragged his feet, he dragged his feet you would not have believed.

C: This was a 30 year...

Dot: I mean, I had until December the 23rd '63 I think it was, yeah '63. '93! I had until that Christmas Eve I served him with a suite. But I had been there; I had had conferences, meetings with him. I met with him in June of that year and talked to him, I said let's have a survey, cus there was a dispute about the 20 arpent line. I said let's do a survey, I'll pay for half of it, you pay for half of it, we'll survey it, we'll know exactly where the line is and you can sign a lease to use the property. Well he himmed and hawed, so finally I just I told the board we're going to survey it, he's not going to pay for half of it, we're going to survey it, so we did. \$23,000 to do the survey. (phone ringing in background) Let me just see who that is. O God, I'll call him back. So, we did it. That was in June of '93. Then you know, I had the survey done, he still wouldn't do that, wouldn't sign the lease. So I made an appointment with him at his office, my one mistake was I didn't take anybody with me. But, what I did was, I made an appointment with him, I was on the ferry I wrote my points that I wanted to get across. One was I wanted to ask him I said, "My board of directors is concerned about acquisitive prescription and we're coming up on that date, do you have any intention of that?" And you know what he said to me, "oooo no! Well I wouldn't think of it. Oh no no, we, I wouldn't do that." Well, when I got back on the boat I had

my points that I covered with him and I put his responses, filled in his responses, and I got back to the office, I typed that letter, and I mailed it to him with a cover letter asking him I said, "this is what I took from our meeting, would you please review it and let me know if this is all right that what we discussed and what came out of our meeting." You know he signed it and sent it back to me and you know when we had the suite, Judge Row was the judge, he's in jail now, good place for him. He wouldn't let me; he wouldn't let us enter it in evidence. He wouldn't let us enter that letter.

C: Why?

Dot: Cus Lyn Perez had sent him to law school, you know. His wife worked for Lyn Perez. He should have recused himself, but you know he wasn't gonna do that. So anyway, my attorney proffered the letter so when we went on appeal, that's the letter they got him. I was so happy, and you know we had to go for the appellate court 3 times. 3 times. First time we had two in our favor and one against, and the one against uhhh I can't remember his name, but anyway he used to always sit at the Perez table at Catholic Charities dinners, so he should've recused himself too, but he didn't. So he voted against us and I think we had to go before 5 judges. Then one of the judges dies in the middle of it, so then we had to go again. And when we went again, that letter did him in. And boy they reamed that attorney up one side and down the other. I was so happy, so anyway, it was kinda like history repeating himself cus Perez was always trying to get the lands away from my grandfather and he was always trying to protect them. And one time when uhhh I don't know if it was before I was born or just after I was born, or just after I was born, but anyway the taxes were due. And my grandfather like I said, he was always trying to sell things and get gather money to, and that's how he got all his stockholders in Delecraw Corporation. You know, he sold stock in the company, and sold things to meet the obligations of the taxes and uhh he uhh, tax was due, and so my grandfather got word that they were laying in wait to hijack the car that was going to the court house, so what they did, what he did was he came down a river in a boat. The car went down. The car was shot at. My dad was in the car. Johnny Melarine was driving, he got shot in the neck and never could talk properly after that. But anyway, they went down up the river. They came up the river, and then went to the court house and avoided the ambush and paid the taxes. But that's how bad it was you know? So anyway, it was always a you know, a thing with the Perez's.

C: Well, let's.. if we can back up again and talk a little bit about land usage on the property. We talked about the 20's being a golden age trapping. The depression comes along and obviously that falls off considerably. War years come along and many men are drafted, so that's another..

it's just compounding an already existing problem. There is some rebound in the 50's but beginning in the late 60's and 70's it's a down turn again with the...

Dot: Well, but in the 40's oil was discovered on that property so that was a good thing. So they survived, that helped the corporation survive.

C: Okay.

Dot: And it was very, it was very good.

C: Who did most of the exploration or... is it Texaco?

Dot: We had Texaco was first, and that was a bad deal but anyway we, you know, they.. they were the first ones and then Richardson and Bass came in and that was in the 40's and that was good, that was a very good deal. But, and then it was all kinds of companies after that, but the main one was Richardson and Bass, Texaco, the Texaco field is practically gone now and I'm afraid Perry Bass is petering out too. And then we had in the 80's. Was it the 80's yeah I guess it was, late 80's. Artco came in with some deep well drilling and paid us advance royalties which is unheard of, you know, they paid us in advance; the stockholders. So the stockholders really got a boom and of course they didn't produce you know? But you know, people have since gone back in and done better.

C: What about the environmental impact of the drilling and...

Dot: Well you know in the beginning nobody realized, nobody understood or realized the damage that the oil companies were doing. You know, everybody's down on oil companies, but they didn't realize what they were doing until it was already done you know? And then when they realized it was already done, they have become more environmentally friendly. So we have, Delecrew has rules when they go on a property, what they can do and what they can't do. And no marsh buggies. Absolutely no marsh buggies. There were marsh buggy traps tracks all over that place, and that's you know, that's bad. You know, you just killing the marsh! So you know, we have... and then when the oil company goes on, they have to have one of our, one of my people

has to be oversee what they do, where they go, and how they do it. So, we have been very you know, and they have been very willing to work with us on that. So...

C: Well with subsidence and erosion and everything else. What I'd like for you to do is to talk up about a couple of things. Louisiana is really the ban guard of environmental change worldwide.

Dot: Yes.

C: And this is the front line. I mean right here we're at ground zero. Can you talk a little bit about how this area has changed in your lifetime environmentally and then the... what kind of impact that's had on the Islanio community there.

Dot: It's had a very hard, it's been a bad a hard impact on the community, because their livelihood depends on the environment. And as the environment goes, so does their livelihood. It used to be ummm, you know, well just going way back when you know, when the Islanios first got here the laws were such that you could go out and shoot wild ducks, bring 'em to the French Market and sell 'em and make a bunch of money. You know, legislature came in, you can't do that anymore. Then the turtles, the things for the turtles: the nets, the seining, all of that stuff has been taken away from them because of the environment. And so, they have lost, but they have always been able to, he seems to be able to come back with something else, which is one of the things I think I'm proudest of being Islanio is that we're so damn adaptable. You know?

C: And resilient.

Dot: Yes. You know, we came from volcanic outcroppings in the Atlantic Ocean, beautiful mountainous terrain, fertile ground, and we came here. Flat land, marshes, swamps, mosquitos, alligators, none of which they have over there, even roaches. You know? (laughter). So you know, we're adaptive. We carved out a way of life here that was so foreign to what we came from that I admire those people so much. So anyway, getting back to ughhh, then after that you know it was, then all of the rules and regulations that have come in. It's been difficult for them, but they you know, they manage to do it.

C: And then the storms.

Dot: And then the storms, oh the storms. Well, the 1915 storm, my mother was 5 years old and my aunt was 3. My grandmother was at the store that my grandfather and his brother owned. It was high, it was raised. The water was coming up. And umm the umm, my grandfather was at the French market. So her brother came by in his big shrimp boat and said "Cameilla come on, imma take you and the girls, we're gunna go high up in the trees," like they did. She says, "oh no I can't leave. Manuel won't know where I am when he comes back." He said, "if you don't leave with me, he won't ever find you when he comes back." He says, "you got to come." she says, "no I'm not coming." She said, "I got all these people on the porch here, I can't leave them here." She said, "I'm not going unless you can take them too." So they all piled into that boat, and they went out and they rode the 1915 storm tied up to trees, high in the sky, tied up to trees. And she told me, she would tell me, "the snakes were in the trees too and they would just drop into the boat." She says, "and all we could do is pick 'em up and throw 'em out. Pick 'em up and throw 'am out, that's all we did the whole time the storm was going on." So anyway, after the storm was over, her brother told her, he said, "you know, if we wouldn't have had all that weight in this boat we never would have made it," so that was one of my bedtime stories. (laughter). So anyway, that was the first one and then of course Betsey came. I'm sure they had others. In 1947 they had one, cus I was a freshman at high school and I just started. Was it September? I had been to school 2 or 3 days and we had a hurricane. 1947, and I'll never forget, I was sitting in my grandparents', my grandfather's room looking out the window, and they had this great big magnolia tree on the side of the house, and while I was looking at it, it laid right down in the driveway. I thought it was gonna lay on me. But ughh, so that was the... and every time there was a storm, since they had a house on Esclanade Avenue, all the family, all the relatives, it was so much fun when we were kids. They would all come up and stay there. An some of 'em would come here and stay because this was high ground then, and umm but you know, all the cousins and everybody would come to our grandparents, and we the kids just had a ball. We had pallets all over the floor and you know we'd play games and it was so much fun. Then and then Betsey came. And Betsey was September the 9th 1965. I had been, I was visiting my grandparents, because my husband was in the air force and September school was starting, so he stayed home with the kids to get them started in school and I came with my daughter. She was a baby. She was born in March so this was September. So she was 5 months old. So I came to New Orleans because my husband and I and our friends Tony and Joan Pezolata purchased a school, we started a school. He was a school teacher and that was always his dream to own his own school. And he was also a builder cus he had, you know, you don't make enough money teaching school. So ughh there was

C: My wife was a ateacher for 30 something years, so I know.

Dot: You have to have another income.

C: Yes.

Dot: And uhhh so anyway, he was also a builder. And we had, you know, we were friends. We'd play cards together and do stuff. They had 4 kids, we had 4 kids, and they were all about the same ages. So he called Don one day in Charleston, South Carolina, he says, "I found our school, can you come?" So Don was in with the Air Force, and they had to do training trips and what not. So he got a pilot to take him to Alvin Calandar field that morning. Tony met him, they went and looked at the building it was a defunct country club. He went and looked at it. He said yeah we'll do it. We each put up \$2,000 that we had saved and we bought it from the homestead, because it had been repossessed, had been taken back. They were tickled to death to have it, to get rid of it. It had a swimming pool, the swimming pool was black and full of all kinds of stuff you know. You didn't know what you were going to find in there. It was just a little over an acre of ground. There was just the one building, the club house. Well Tony, being a builder, now this was mother's day in May when we did this. And you know we opened in September, the September of Betsey. We opened, we built, he built that school. I stayed, I stayed for the you know to help out with the registration and stuff like that, and Don stayed in Charleston with the kids, and I was supposed to go back in September after we opened, and umm so I did. But umm, Betsey came. We had an open house, we had registered, you realize we registered 75 kids with floor plans on the wall of the school. And it was the year of integration in public schools. And so you know, we got a lot of bites, a lot of people, but unfortunately we got more than we more that we didn't want than what we wanted. So anyway, we did open, we had an open house the Sunday before Betsey hit on Friday. So people had come through and seen the school, it was beautiful. All new Oak paneling on the wall and everything. Well Betsey came and took the roof off the club house building, demolished the roof on the new classroom building and was terrible. I'll never forget we went there and the 3 of us stood in that 2 story building. We had this tecton roof an iron, I mean steel building. We just stood in the middle of that floor and looked up at the sky, the clouds running by, and cried, the 3 of us. But anyway, said well okay. One good thing, all of our textbooks were against the wall on book shelves against that wall. Well evidently the rain came straight down or blew the other way, because the textbooks were safe, they were good. Then we had to, we decided well we'll close that off, that 2 story building. And then we concentrated on the main building the, a classroom building. Tony was a builder, he knew people, you know, in the business, and so his friend Sidney, Sidney Campbell he's still, well he's dead now but he still has a roofing company. He said Tony, I can give you all the materials you want, but I can't give you any labor because I don't have any. So Tony and I put the new roof.

We went out on the roof. We slapped tar, and Joan his wife was pregnant. She delivered October the first. This was in September, she would walk around the bottom downstairs and after we'd repair the roof, it would rain and she would tell us where the leaks were, So we'd slap some more tar on the roof. It was fun though you know. So anyway, we did that, and we opened, we were supposed to open, and we opened the day we were supposed to open, but we had to close right away cus the Board of Health had to come inspect it. And we knew that was gonna happen. We knew that we were gonna get closed. You know, but we wanted to get our foot in the door. So we did. And they came and they closed us down until they could inspect everything. And then they came, we just, we opened on September the 13th. So it was our first day, but then we had to close, and then we opened a couple of days later, but it was it was really wonderful.

C: That's a microcosmic view of Islanio resilience right there.

Dot: So anyway, then Camille came. Camille was I think, you know, Betsey was bad for Arabi and Chalmette area, but and it was bad well it was always bad for Delecraw Island you know, but it wasn't as bad as Katrina. I mean in retrospect, Betsey was nothing, nothing.

C: What is the future now for the island, Delecraw.

Dot: I think it's all sports. All sports. You know, and you know, I'm used to all the, you know, the Islanios complain about the sports. They don't like 'em. They call 'em cheebas. Cheevos, cheevos, because they walk like goats on a boat. That's their impression. And so it's cheevo you know, the sport. But you know I always, I mean early on even before Katrina, I thought it was really short sided of them, they really should have cultivated those people, because they could've made a good living off of them. But they didn't see it that way. That's just my, my opinion. But ughh, now there are very few residents, it's mostly people sports who have camps or you know, go down there to fish and hunt.

Don: What percentage of the population left the island after Katrina? Just a ballpark...

Dot: (laughs) Like ughh maybe 98%. You know..

Don: It's that drastic?

Dot: It's that bad. It's that bad. And you know after Katrina we came back home just to visit, you know for a visit to look at the stuff, and I stood in front of this place and cried. I mean I cried every time I came here for 6 months after Katrina. I stood out in the front of that yard and just cried, because I could not believe that.

Don: I see the pictures.

Dot: You know, and umm but right after Katrina we went down there, there was nothing. There was nothing. I said it must've looked like this when the Islanios first came. There was nothing. There were no houses, nothing. So ughh and Wyclosky the same thing, and Shell beach was bad, really bad. But you know, some of them will never leave, ever. I mean Blacky Campo, he was I mean, you know he was devastated with Katrina, yet he put his building back, it wasn't good enough to support his family again as it had been before, but he got back with the gas, and the bait, and you know, stuff like that. I wish you could've interviewed him. We have a deposition of his.

C: Oh well great.

Dot: We have, we took his deposition in the Perez case.

C: Well we'd love to have it, if you have a copy, we'd love to...

Dot: Mike would have, would know.

C: We'll try to contact him and add that to the archive.

Dot: He was an incredible gentleman. He really was. Good person, ethical, Islanio through and through.

Don: Well for those that stayed, what keeps them here?

Dot: It's the land. It's their land. I think. It's what they know. They don't want to know anything else. You know? That's my opinion. I don't really know what keeps them there, I can't imagine, but anyway, that's I think what it is.

C: Well I've kept you here longer than I expected, but I want to thank you for everything you shared. Is there any question I should've asked you?

Dot: Mmmm. I don't think, I pretty much covered it. You're welcome, y'all are welcome to come to the office and you know, look through our files. There's one thing I really wish you all would maybe contact him, Bryan Gowlan. He wrote, you know him?

C: Oh I know about him. In fact, I was the editor of the state journal that published his...

Dot: Ooo okay, the.. "The Trapper's War."

C: "The Trapper's War"

Dot: Yeah. Well I... he interviewed me before he wrote it, while he was writing it, and I met with him several times, and I gave him access to our files and I showed him all of the trapper's leases after the umm after the trapper's war when Acme Land and Fur became Acme Land and Fur and then the trapper's had areas, leases to to hunt, I mean to trap, and my grandfather made a deal with him. I'll give you 10 years to pay and you can own the property, you can hunt it, you can trap it for 10 years and after 10 years you pay your thing every, on time every, when it's due and he never charged him until after trapping season was over you know, then you can own it in 10 years, and many of them did. And those people who did are wealthy people today because there

was oil there. You know, those who didn't, I'm afraid they didn't like it. You know, they thought he should've given it to him, but he didn't. He had to pay the bank. You know, he borrowed 300 and some odd thousand dollars.

Don: Plus the taxes.

Dot: In the 90 20 and he had to keep up the taxes. You know, you can't just you know. He didn't make that much money off of rum running to sustain him through that too. You know? So.. anyway. It was interesting, an interesting phenomena.

C: Well, it's a, it's an interesting family history, and I really appreciate you sharing it with us.

Dot: I'm very proud of it. I love it, that's why I'm here every Friday. You know?

C: Well this is a magnificent facility. I mean the whole complex, it's wonderful. My hat's off.

Dot: I know. Thank you. My mother and my aunt donated the original piece, the museum up to the parking lot right back there, and then after my mother died I was not involved too much before she died, with the Islanios. I mean I would, when they had something I would come and help serve food or fix food or something you know, but I was never really you know, like she was. And then she died and there was this beautiful thing here. You know, that belonged to my grandparents. And I wanted to preserve it. So I added to it.

C: Well it's a beautiful sight, beautiful sight.

Dot: I added to it. My aunt and I donated the rest of this property on the other side of the multipurpose building. And then I donated the rest of it to the St. Bernard Extension there, because I went to umm, I went to Lafayette and they have a Cajun village and I said well we need an Islanio village. So we got one now, we got one.

C: Don't worry, I'm very serious, this is wonderful. The whole entire place.

Dot: So we moved the little houses. You know? We have you know, and all this belongs to the parish. Cus the society can't maintain it. But we paid all these houses, we paid to get 'em here, we gave the parish the land, that's why when sometimes I want something done from the parish they tell me they don't have the money, I want to blow my stack but I don't because it's not gonna get me anywhere. But ughh, you know? There's a lot of money that we put into this. Not just me but the society. You know?

C: Right.

Dot: Because I mean the festivals, we have the festivals and they're such hard work. Oh my God, unbelievable. I just wrote a festival guide, I was festival chairman last year. Rhonda Hannon was before me, and she had written up something, a guide more or less, but it wasn't you know, it was more like plat plans. So I wrote, I took it upon myself to write a guide so that next festival chairman when Ryan and I aren't here, you can take that book and you can put on a festival. Got phone numbers for everybody you need to contact, when you need to contact 'em, how much you need from them, you know, portalets, oysters, this, that, the parish ughh the sheriff's office, the deputies, the portalets, you know? You start from scratch. You got a big job ahead of you. So anyway, we got a guide now.

C: Well great. Well thanks again.. (inaudible).

Dot: Okay, I am just, I know I talk too much.

C: Oh absolutely not. This was great and I really appreciate you sharing.

Dot: Good.

C: As I said, we're trying, we're just simply preserving those for future generations and we found that the most valuable information around is what sits between the mo... the ears of the people who lived through it.

Dot: Between the ears, yeah. I had a golf instructor that used to tell me it's all between the ears.

End.