

Norris Melancon and Mrs. Melancon

Interviewer: Carl Brasseaux

Carl Brasseaux: This is Carl Brasseaux. I'm at 186 Norris Melancon Road between Church Point and Richard. It's July 2, 2009, and I'm here with Mr. and Mrs. Norris Melancon. And Mr. Melancon, before we get started I just wanna get your permission to record this and put this in the archives so that people who wanna study life in South Louisiana in the years to come can listen to it and get information and use it in articles or books or documentaries or whatever it is they're working on. Is that okay with you?

Norris: Oh yeah. Perfectly.

B: Yeah, and, as you know by now, there's no money for anybody involved in any of this so this is strictly a case of trying to preserve the knowledge. And what I'd like to talk with you all about today is cattle and...You grew up on a farm in Acadia Parish, and later in St. Landry Parish.

N: Correct.

B: And you ended up living in Acadia Parish between Churchpoint and Richard at Point [Noir] and I'd like for you to discuss the cattle at all three of those places--all three of the places basically were areas where people engaged in farming, mostly, they were growing cotton.

N: Yeah.

B: Right? That was the primary occupation. So how did cattle fit into all of this?

N: Okay a farmer—most of the farmers were [tenet] farmers so, the landlord would prefer having all his land in farming, but if he had to have a little patch so the farmer could have his milk and his meat. And they were limited a lot so a [tenet] farmer would have, say maybe 5 or 6 cows who were what we call milk cows and they—it was so—the land was so scarce, people would use to road for grazing. In the morning they'd open the gatepost to cows in the road, and then they keep the dishes clean and it was hardly no traffic then. And that helped a lot on the pasture but, on the average, they figured like one acre per head of cattle. The grass was always short. And then in the fall after all the crop was harvested, they would turn them loose in the fields. That was a great thing so they could get fat in the winter. There was hardly no feed to feed 'em and sometimes a farmer would cut a little bit of hay on the headland and make a little haystack, and in tight times in the winter where he'd let the cows go and eat on there. But that's about all they—

B: How many head what a normal person--normal household have for a tennet farmer? About how many—?

N: Oh I'd say 10—uh, it all depends on the amount of pasture, I would say maybe ten or 12, something like that, that many.

B: Now, the cattle that they were raising, these were just a mix-breed? There was no special kind of cow that anybody—?

N: Oh no.

B: In those days?

N: If it was a cow it was a cow. They didn't look for breed. Now there's some people that started this, but what was bad about the farmers that know they were over

breeding their stock, and it drops the value of a cow. They wouldn't grow as big as they should.

B: Mm hm.

N: But they didn't know any better and they did what they could.

B: Now the family's in—would get together at certain times of the year for [Boucharees]. Can you talk a little bit about how the families organized, and what the Boucharee was.

N: Yeah. In the—there was no refrigerator. So you couldn't keep meat for very long. What the farmers would do, they'd get like—20 farmers would agree to kill a calf, [have a weekend]. And there were two, we'd say there were like 22, really, members but two of them would do the slaughtering and they would get that share of meat for nothing, just for slaughtering the cow and the farmers would get together, each weekend, one would—on the Saturdays—one would bring a calf to the slaughter pen, then those two men would slaughter the calf, then the meat was divided according to each part of the cow or the calf—it mostly was calves, and they'd get each like a ten-pound of meat. And that was—they had to do something with the meat. It depends on the size of the family. The big families would probably eat the ten pounds of meat over the weekend, but like uh, we were just two, we couldn't eat ten pounds of meat over the weekend, but we'd divide it with my in-laws and [were about done to have two] so [they] made about even. Each...uh...

N: For sale. And they [sold] to meat about 25 cents a pound.

B: Mm hm.

N: What we call "Mixed Meat." It was a piece of every part of the cow. You [couldn't] buy—just go buy steak or just shoulder and take—[no]. They knew how to divide proportionally until you get your equal amount of meat.

B: Okay, well can you tell me that again, [Paul], about them putting the meat out in the morning? Because I had a problem with the recorder just now. You say that again so we can get it on here?

N: Stuff from where?

B: About—you said they would kill the animal, they'd start at midnight and they'd work through the night and that's where I need for you to start again.

N: Yeah. The two men that would do the slaughtering would get up around midnight, one o'clock, it all depends, and then they'd slaughter the calf and had it--it had to be cut all by hand and they didn't have any lights, they had to use a kerosene lantern and fight with the mosquitoes. So about—maybe about 4:00, the meat was ready and the farmers would start coming in with their bucket and pick up their meat.

B: Mm hm. Now, you had said to divide the meat up, they had piles of meat waiting for them, they used a scale to weigh it so that everybody got roughly the same amount?

N: Correct. There was that [inch] scale and they had like all the shoulders in one place and all the steak in one place, and the ribs in one place—things like that, then they knew about how much to put of each to make it 10 pounds. And they'd balance it to where it comes out good.

B: So people were generally happy with the—

N: Oh, it was somethin' else. We would meet the--the only way we could preserve meat was what we called "Salt Meat." We'd put 'em in salt and that goes for sausage, and bacon, and so on, and it was a big thing on weekends to have some fresh meat.

M: Yeah.

B: Now how long would the meat keep? They had different ways of keeping it. Some people would put that meat in a jug and put it under the house, where it was the coolest spot. Some would take it, dig a hole under the house, and put their meat in that jug and put it in that hole. It all depends. Now some people would—

B: Did people put it in a well?

N: Yeah, there was some put it in the well. You're taking a big chance there, you could—if you put it in the well, that was those—the only way you could put it in there, with the bucket. [Draw ya milk]—you'd draw your water from the rope and a bucket. And you'd have to tie the meat in the jug and screw it tightly. And that bucket was heavy enough to bust the jug. Or if you didn't tie that jug well you could lose your meat. Not too many people would put it in the well, but it was a good place for it.

B: Mm hm. Now, you said, if they had leftover meat, people who weren't part of the Boucharee community, people would come to try to buy meat sometimes.

N: Yeah those that was not a member, and they wanted some meat, well they'd go and wait to see how it was gonna come out.

B: You have any idea what they sold the meat for?

N: 25 cents a pound.

B: 25 cents a pound.

N: What'd they call it? Mixed meat: a piece of everything. I had an old cow--you see the people couldn't—they didn't have no trailers to bring a cow to a sale and when the cow gets old, they had to get rid of it some kinda way, and they also used that too, [why they called] the old cow slaughtering. And the same as the calves, they'd bring the cow to the slaughter bin and announce to the public that there would be some meat for sale and normally it went well. People would come to buy.

B: So it didn't last long.

N: No. It was cheap meat. At 25 cents a pound. Most of 'em would buy ten pounds just like the regular members.

B: Well, When you were little, Paul, uh there was a law in the place that required people to dip their cattle to get rid of the ticks. Do you remember anything about that?

N: Yes they—especially those who used the woodlands for pasture, there were a lot of ticks. It got so bad to where the government started having a place where you had to dip your cattle for the purpose of the [states]. I don't remember how often, maybe every week or maybe every two weeks. And you have to push your cows to that--somebody would open a pit along the road somewhere and it might be a half a mile or a mile, or maybe more, but during that time there was fence—there was always good fences along the road so people would get together on horses and drive the cows in the road up to the pit and then there was some men there waiting for them, and then they push 'em in the pin, and they would force the cows to jump in that hole where they had those chemicals in there.

B: And they had filled the hole up with water I guess, huh?

N: Yes, the dip—I guess it must have been maybe 'bout four feet of water, maybe five, and the cow would come in like a chute and then they would force the cow to jump in there and come out on the other end. That way she'd get all wet and then there was a government man there with some paint and he'd paint the cow somewhere on the back and that shows that that cow has been dipped. They had different colors and numbers to go by, and then they also had a special man that they'd go out in the pastures and check to see if he had brought the cows in.

B: And what happened if he didn't?

N: Well they were penalized but I don't remember how it worked. We never did have to go bring ours because we were living way out in the country, we didn't have to—there was no woodland that we'd end up probably with ticks. But it was a good thing. It finally got rid of 'em.

B: Mm hm. What—Now you said they stopped about the time you got married? There was a pit right across the bayou and I remember, I got married in '47 and I remember for sure one year after that, but not long, it could do--but it probably stopped about '48 or '49. About that time.

B: Well that's interesting. I didn't realize it had gone on that late.

N: It was a lot of trouble, especially when you had a cow with a little calf and then it happened a few times that they drowned in the pit. What they'd do with the calves is tie the calf with a rope and they get on the other end and they just pull the calf through. And they—it was rough on cattle. 'Cause there—I think you have to bring the calves too. Most likely you had to because the ticks could go on the calves too. [Why it was bad] was when a group of farmers would come with one flock of cattle, and they'd get mixed up with somebody else on the road, they had to know their cattle because they're gonna get 'em mixed up and it did happen too.

B: Now, people weren't branding cattle anymore?

N: Well there's not too many people that had brands to brand the cattle.

B: Mm hm. And that was some mis-deal made with those cattle on the road there. When I mentioned they turned the cows loose on the road for grazing, sometimes, especially during that time when they were pushing the cattle to the pit to have 'em dipped—

B: They'd pick up somebody's cow along the way?

N: Yeah. Some of 'em had a habit of that and they'd get caught. And it caused a lot of trouble. They didn't have no brands—no, only a few people had brands. My daddy had a brand, he branded his cattle, but it was a good idea on the road because sometimes the cow wouldn't come back at night. They'd find a good place to graze and they would stick around there. You had to watch them closely for that.

B: Now, you talked about people having good fences along the road, I imagine they must've had to have good fences around the pasture too to keep the cows from getting in the crops—

N: The cows are not trouble. Yes. They didn't have no hot-shot then, and especially if two farmers had their pasture together with say—just side by side and especially if bulls. They'd fight and they'd go through the fence. That was a big problem with that. They would put like a yoke on the cattle—those who'd eat through the fence—it helped a way, but in the other way all it did, was the cow would tear up more fence by pushing.

B: Mm hm.

N: We had a bull that was so bad about jumping the fence, and breaking the fence, we put a—what they call a "Bull's Nose"—"A Bull's Ring" in the Bull's nose with 4 or 5 links of chain to it. And that kept him in for a little. [Not—it wasn't 100%].

B: What happened when somebody's cow jumped the fence and got into somebody else's crops.

N: Well, they'd have a little fuss there!

B: Hahaha.

N: It happened too. They'd go into somebody else's pasture, well if it was two good neighbors, one would have the other one get it out. That one part was bad was with the hogs. Hogs were kept in pens all through the summer and it was just like the cattle, once the crop was in they were turned loose and they would go--they survived through the winter that way. And sometimes—I've heard this man, with—every night he opened the door, let the hogs come out and feed on his neighbor's corn and couldn't stop him. So the neighbor went and hid in his corn patch and when he opened the door, let the hogs come out, he kill 'em on sight. And that solved the problem there.

B: Yeah, I'm sure it would. Hahahaha.

N: Yeah, the other one understood. There was a lot of that. A lot of shooting hogs in the corn. Some would just shoot 'em to scare 'em away, and some they shoot to keep 'em. They'd stay there.

B: How many—I know when I was a kid, everybody had a milk cow. Who's job was it generally to take care of the milk cow in the house?

N: Well most of the time was the owner. The farmer.

B: Right, but I mean, was there usually one of the kids—?

N: If there was enough. Once they get old enough, you start milking cow. I know I remember when I—what I'd do is—you know, we usually let the calf go suck a while on the cow and they claimed that the cow would relax and she'd give more milk. So my job was to tie the calf with a rope and let 'em get it started, then pull 'em away, tie 'em to a post, and my daddy would come and milk while I—we had to kinda limit the milk you get out of the cow because the calf's got to live too. Sometimes...we'd draw like 75% of the milk, maybe half the milk, and leave the rest for the calf. It depends how good the cow. Some cows would give a lot of milk and some wouldn't and a farmer couldn't hardly feed a cow with feed to produce milk so sometimes you had to milk two or three cows to have enough milk.

B: Mm hm.

N: But we made it through.

B: What did ya'll do with the cream?

N: What i liked to do was peel a sweet potato and skim the cream off the milk and put it on there but that—uh...some people would keep it to make butter but we never did do that we just—

B: Did many people make butter?

N: No.

B: Because that's a lot of work.

N: Oh yeah that's a lot of work. And it's like you said there was no refrigerator to keep it cool—

B: Did people keep it for coffee?

N: Some people would do that. I don't remember my dad and them doing that. I think they just drank the coffee straight. But some people would put a little bit of cream in it.

B: Well I'm trying to think if there's anything else, Paul, I need to ask you right now, kinda drawing a blank, but you think of anything else that we need to put on there about cows and how people kept cows back in those days? You said that nobody cut hay in those days, they just basically—

N: Well they—[more] machine was scarce. Very seldom there was a [moor] machine to cut the grass and a [tenant] didn't have no extra acreage to make hay. You have to make it why they call on the headland—

B: Right.

N: On the [turn-a-rows], are **the say** the same. And once we finished letting the crop go, well there was no more traffic on the headland, the grass would grow and they'd cut that and the best they can and pile it up and make a little haystack. Now some would put it—if they had an attic, sometimes they would put that hay loose in the attic but that was just something else to feed with. It'd get all tangled up and you had a hard time to get some for the cattle. Then in the later days, my daddy had bought a moor machine, he'd cut his hay and he had bought a hay-bailer, operated by a mule and that was something great at that time. We could bail the hay and put it up in the attic and it would feed so much better.

B: Well okay Paul. Thank you. This is—

N: I'm glad to do it!