

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Loyman P. Melancon **COLLECTION:** 4700.2092

IDENTIFICATION: Cut Off, Louisiana, Native [b. 1934] and resident; former oilfield worker; retired oysterman; French-speaker; Catholic

INTERVIEWER: Bruce Ford

SERIES: Bayou Lafourche

INTERVIEW DATE: October 24, 2010

FOCUS DATES: 1930-1940s [childhood]; 1950s [oil industry]; 1960s-1985 [oyster fishing]; 2010 [French-speaking culture in Louisiana]

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3938

Interview conducted in Cut Off, Louisiana; part of Coastal Sustainability Studio at Louisiana State; Loyman Melancon was born in Cut Off [c. 1934], raised in this community; discusses childhood; when kid would swim in bayou; five kids in family [two brothers and two sisters, Loyman was youngest]; learned to swim at five; brothers would paddle flatboat made of cypress and Melancon had to swim to catch up; no television, so played "all sorts of games"; two cans stacked, whoever was "it" had to put a third can on top of two others while other kids tried to knock can tower over by throwing, [complicated rules about tagging]; another game: holes in ground, each had long pole, try to get from main hole to side holes, one person was without hole, he'd be "it"; try to bat away other peoples' sticks, steal holes; game with pointed sticks, "pique" [?]; drive stick into ground, try to knock other people's stick down, knock it away; had to hit stick three times; played basketball with a piece of cardboard wrapped in tape; use wooden barrels [for nails] on barn as basket; play all day long; Melancon played in high school band, athletics; lived on farm, mom made shirts and underwear from feedstock material [cotton]; Melancon didn't want to change for sports because other people had "real" briefs, "didn't want to show them my flour shorts"; another boy in same situation, they both changed, "his momma hadn't bleached the material, and it was red-boiled rice!" [laughs]; had to do chores at home, pigs, cows, and chickens; every morning fed, watered, milk cow, bring cow into pasture; chores before school and after; had to cross bayou in flat boat; bridges were far apart and family didn't have car; to go to grocery or school; wooden ferry in front of Cut Off High School would cross pupils; discusses mechanics of ferry; no school bus [walk to school]; bring peanut butter sandwich in brown bag, ant problems; when Melancon was kid it was all farming and fishing in area; lived not far from plantation that cut sugarcane by hand; discusses harvesting process: stack cane in wagons; go to house on bayou with weigh master, weigh cane, load it to wooden barges; stern wheelers brought to refinery in Raceland; grandfather was overseer at Clovelly Farms, raised cotton and sugarcane; had Clydesdales and mules [before mechanical tractors]; mule

would pull gear to raise sugarcane [onto barge]; sometimes barges would take on water; played six-man football because it was a class-B [small] school; won 1953 state championship; after childhood married Mamie, had five kids; kids stayed in community, have good jobs, their own kids; Melancon went to work in oil fields; started as radio operator and clerk, because roustabout, then roustabout pusher [in charge of men], then a pumper gauge, paraffin scrap [?], roughneck; father-in-law, oysterman, had heart attack; asked Melancon to join business, including boats and oyster beds; successful, retired in 1985; in retirement: go on vacation; Melancon just spent two weeks in Nova Scotia; transportation was by foot; Melancon was sixteen when they got first refrigerator; ice truck, buy five cents of ice for ice box; made homemade root beer; tells story about trying to trick grocery store clerk by bartering duck eggs [not chicken] for sweets; punishment was cleaning the “rolling store”, which drove bayou with groceries, first pulled by mules and then bus; sell and trade [e.g. eggs for beans and rice] in community; cleaning: rotten potatoes and onions, had to fill in bins of rice and beans, sometimes you got a half-gone banana; lied to mom about why he was working because parents would have beaten him up if they’d found out; flat boat was used to go across bayou; this side [highway 308] wasn’t as built up as other [LA 1]; this side was gravel, other side was paved, had dance halls and theater; dad worked for oil company so family had two flat boats; dad took small one to dock; big one for family; flat boats: square ends, made of cypress, about sixteen feet long with seats in front and back, two benches in middle; wind made it tricky to navigate; Melancon would bring dad’s lunch across bayou; Melancon discusses family background; dad was descendant of Nova Scotia Acadians; mom is Italian; many ethnic groups in this area: Spanish, French, and [African America]; each people have different way of cooking and eating, which makes food so good; fisherman cook used one stove [on board], crew say “man I’d eat this”, and cook puts a bunch of different requests into same pot, that how jambalaya came to be; down bayou people make gumbo with oysters; up bayou put in chicken and sausage; Melancon does seafood, oysters give it extra kick; every section of bayou speaks a little different; French is a little different; momma used to work in shrimp factory, sisters took care of Melancon; before bathtub in house cleaned in #3 tub [?], five kids, as baby Melancon was last one to take bath; some kids got to leave school to go trapping with family; Melancon got jealous that they got miss school; opportunity to make a lot of money on muskrat pelts; when Melancon was eleven, dad took leave from oil company, took boys to camp for three months; camp: cardboard, newspaper on wall, two bedrooms, three boys in bed; wooden stove for cooking and heat; behind cabin gutter and drums to catch rainwater; had to get rid of mosquito larvae in drums; now people buy distilled water; Melancon thinks canal water is fine; would help mom skin [musk]rats; process: wash, put on mold, take meat off; if it rained, had to bring pelts into sleeping cabin to hang; next-door-neighbor was a teacher; Melancon would skin and wash her rats in exchange for lessons; a kid raised on the bayou today doesn’t cut his own grass; grandkids are too lazy; Melancon would go to [theater] in Larose, [also one in Golden Meadow]; guy drove big truck to theater, flatbed “box” with benches, driver would get paid per head by theater [cut of admissions]; riding in truck meant lots of bugs in your eyes; Saturday they had a Western [Gene Autry, Roy Rogers], then a continuation [Captain Marvel, Superman]; Sunday double feature was a “love show” [Marilyn Monroe]; would walk to dance hall; once somebody stole flatboat [to ride across bayou], had to take off clothes, swim across, fetch boat, then go home; Melancon discusses religion; born Catholic, baptized in Larose; communions: first in Larose; then family moved up bayou, father bought larger piece of land at Cote Blanche; made big communion at Sacred Heart; recalls story about getting communion, trying to swallow wafer, kneeling and seeing how bad the

bottom of the boys' shoes were; wore tennis shoes to play sports; ran barefoot on gravel road, feet were tough; Melancon married and raise kids Catholic; Melancon went to public school; worked in Texaco oil field for eight years, started as radio operator and went "up the ladder"; father-in-law had fleet of four boats, had one son [younger than Melancon] working with him; in 1959 started working with father-in-law; everything was done by hand; brought oysters on boat with dredge; five-foot, wedge-shaped, with rake at end; wench with chain would pull thing onto boat, dump on deck, throw it overboard again; one dredge on each side, operated simultaneously; bring oysters to your reef, which you leased from state; cost \$1/acre; each farmer had his own bed; if get out of business you can lease or buy your farm's rights to other oysterman; buying a right to use it; kept beds marked; every so often the surveyors came for wildlife and fishery; Melancon discusses oyster trade; open season went to where oysters grow naturally [brackish water on the other side of Mississippi]; if it's too salty they die; get dredging and turish [?] license; had to cross through two locks [to get to beds?]; dredge all day, then travel all night to your reef; marked reef boundaries with eighteen-foot poles with rags or palmetto on ends; throw oysters in bed; to distribute spread oysters in fanning motion; boat steers to corners, then in figure eight, until you had covered entire bed; after you throw out twenty loads, use pair of hand tongs to check if there are drum fish [they can eat oyster bed overnight]; you can hear drum of eating under seven feet of water [why they are called "drum" fish]; fish can weigh thirty-five pounds; teeth grind oysters; snails as predator: if oyster opens for water a snail can stick barb in and poisons oyster; oyster weakens and snail eats it; alternatively snail gets on back of oyster and drills a hole; up to twenty five small ones on single oyster, waiting for oyster to open; also a threat: "two legged thief" [humans]; crab fishers go out with hand tongs and steal oysters; plus storms; fresh water balance [during oil spill fresh water was used push oil out, bed water was too fresh and killed oyster]; only time an oyster moves is when it's born; "mud of march"; oyster gets milky, opens up and lets eggs out; has both sexes; microscopic thing floating in water, transparent, looking for place to rest; as shell starts to form, touches something and gets stuck; keeps building shell; bed small oysters, grow on reef; better to dredge single ones than clusters [bananas metaphor: cluster takes up more room, don't want to have to break them up]; haul to steam factories, ship to Massachusetts, Chesapeake Bay, California, all over world, eighteen-wheelers full; [Louisiana was] producing 80% of oysters in US; now it's less because of oil, fewer farmers; love the business because it was interesting to see how things would grow; growth cycle, first not a lot of meat because it was producing shell; during march, meat would fill up; had to know when to bring it to market; let the grow enough; big oysters at end of season; was a race to get to factory; made a trip every day of the week; men take oysters to conveyor, loaded onto small boxcar; into washer, drop them into steam box, then woman shucking them by hands [gloves and knife] into container; once it was full, went to weigh master in stainless steel container; weighed how many ounces you had; shuckers would get in rhythm, dance so they could open fast; Melancon had to check up on shuckers [in case she wasn't good at opening your oysters]; from stainless bin went to four ounce cans, processed with salty preservative and steamed again; put label on it; best label was Dunbar Brand or Blue Plate; broken pieces would be labeled differently; "I wanted to be in the Dunbar brand all the time"; oysters went to supermarkets all over; steam factories worked on oysters until shrimp season, then stopped; oystermen started making sacks for oyster bars; doing maintenance on beds; fish snails in summer; make snail trap with long pole, pointed end; fasten three palmetto sheets, make skirt to spread out like Hawaiian skirt; stick it in reef; snails lay eggs on leaves; put out two hundred poles; next day small skiff went around to pull out sticks; hit in on boat and snails would fall into

boat; deposit snails on back of [larger] boat; shaped like periwinkle; would die [out of water]; later put shells back in water for island/reef creation; now you can sell, snails are good to eat; Melancon discusses oil spill; has kids, grandkids involved with oil and seafood; stores, motels: it affects everyone, even guy selling gas; people are losing jobs, moving away; biggest problem with oysters is they can't move; Davis Palm [?] Locks toward New Orleans on Highway 90; after spill open gates wide open, big amount of fresh water coming in; using water to push oil out but it killed oysters; oil on oysters also did harm; seafood is same way: shrimp can move, but if they're caught they are covered in oil; can cause fish kill, lower oxygen; with dispersant not good for humans, seafood, or birds; dispersant would burn cleanup crews' skin; got sick by inhaling dispersants; people are leery to come down, don't want to eat seafood; BP is relocating people parish to parish and from out of state, rather than using local fisherman; moratorium on drilling means many people living beyond their means were losing homes; "I wasn't raised that way: if I bought something I had to have the money to buy it"; today credit cards means a different way of life; oil sinks; son [took over oyster boats] working for BP [on clean up]; when he puts his boat in reverse oil comes to surface; grass is full of oil; rough water the oil comes up ; dispersant made it sink but didn't dissolve it; "it's fossil fuel, it came from the ground and will go back into the ground"; when he was a kid, submarines right off shore torpedoed some tankers; oil all along the coast from Alabama to Texas; shrimpers will tell you that; it all disappeared, and people went back to doing what they do; this is a bigger spill; Melancon discusses home life; lived on side of bayou growing up, plantation land; daddy bought old office, converted into shotgun-style home: long hall on one side, three bedrooms, parlor, dining room, bathroom [came later], kitchen; wash shed right behind house; dad was working on tugs; mom worked on shrimp shed; made money and they bought bathroom shed; bought living room set, dining room set; Detroit Jewel gas stove; each acquisition came in stages; when Melancon was nine family bought near Sacred Heart Church, with farmland; house was moved onto barge, towed down bayou, at new site rolled off the barge and into yard; old type of shingles on house; two wires with granite [type of grounding for electricity?]; listened to three radio stations but during bad weather only get one [WWL in New Orleans]; other stations were from Cincinnati, Ohio, and Del Rio, Texas; listened to Max [Schmeling] and Joe Louis box; dad listened to Yankees baseball; mom listened to Amos 'n' Andy, My Gal [?], Blondie and Dagwood Bumstead [soap opera radio]; Grand Old Opry and Louisiana Hayride on Saturday; no television; mom would bring sister to dance; Melancon was too young so he'd slide on dance floor, take little girls and dance in corner by bandstand; Lee Brothers Dance Hall has a lot of history; Melancon and his wife's names are near the bandstand; good childhood; slept in the same bed [as brothers?], at night we'd sit on porch and talk about Rougaroo, "anything to scare you"; make smoke with moss; before Melancon went to school, grandmother [widow, in 70s] took care of him; would go trapping, kept big garden; brought him in pirogue, carried roast chicken and biscuits in coffee can, jug of water; "push pull" past her traps, check on all of them; tranhouse [?]; pull moss out of tree, spread out to dry, used for furniture [upholstery stuffing]; her bed was made out of shuck; to make bed she'd take a stick and beat on it; brought lantern for bed at night; close wooden doors so room was like a tomb; Melancon and grandmother would play cards and Chinese checkers by lantern light; break bricks to rub on floors on porch; grandma had trap to catch cardinals, had cage of them; made rosaries with bees [wax?]; walked to church, anytime she saw a good flower she'd take a cutting, her yard was beautiful, [flowers and] all kinds of fruits; go fishing in bayou, to catch catfish she'd say rosary; my home: moved to Cote Blanche house with farmland; after WWII, c. 1945-6 mom and dad built another house; Melancon built ranch style brick house in

1960; four bedroom, 2.5 baths with double garage, workshop; a nice home; only four years to pay off; grew up speaking French, but if you spoke in school they hit your fingers with a ruler; second offense put you on knees with rice or corn, thirty minutes or hour; next time sent to professor [principal?] with a big paddle; next time you were kicked out of school; grandparents spoke French, mom spoke English to kids; daddy was not educated, talked in French and English [little bit he learned from momma]; Melancon did not teach his children French [used it as cover, when he and wife didn't want kids to understand]; "we never knew that it would get to this point, that we were the last generation speaking French"; "I hate that because I love it [the language]"; learned to read and write French; interviewer asks about future of Cajun culture; Melancon says it's getting worse because of the shoreline; before there were barrier islands, keep certain kind of water for oysters; more [too strong] saltwater is killing oysters; Barataria Bay; water was more salty but oysters would get used to it; keep it brackish through winter; with land being washed away, people going further inside to produce oysters, places where we didn't even fish before; now they don't bed, just fish out of marsh; not as good of a quality of oyster; Melancon visited Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island; an oyster cost ninety-five cents each and wasn't edible; went clamming in Nova Scotia, big clams were good; had to walk 1.5 miles out, place has 30-40 foot tides every six hours; here 2-3 feet tide twelve hours; our coastline is going, fishing will go with it; fishing was getting bad without this [oil]; farming is going, too; people don't want to work anymore; the "Cajuns aren't like when I was a kid"; Mexicans, Vietnamese are doing work; in big companies you work forty five minutes and get fifteen minute break; "I never had break in life"; got cattle when he retired; working with son [grandson?] to make a fence, told him "we take a break when we go eat dinner"; kid had radio set, always hooked up, Melancon wonders "did you come to work or come to dance?"; "The kids today..."; speaking in French; [speaks some French phrases]; group gets together to discuss words that they're losing in Cajun; different definitions lead to arguments; share definition, pronunciation, what it means, use it in sentence; meet every third Tuesday of month; also meet on Mondays at McDonalds to speak French; mommas don't care [about teaching kids French], grandparents have to do it, so it's going to go away; "I like my culture, wouldn't move away for anything"; "I love it over here"; Nova Scotians talk exactly like us; lovely but Louisiana is better; wife's family is from French.

TAPES: 1 (T3938)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 13 minutes

PAGES INDEX: 7 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Interviewee biographical information sheet; Interviewer index;
Interviewer contact sheet

RESTRICTIONS: None