

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Emma Gilbert

COLLECTION: 4700.236

IDENTIFICATION: Charenton, Louisiana hairdresser and salon-owner, lifetime Louisiana resident

INTERVIEWER: Rohm Morales

SERIES: Louisiana Sea Grant Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

INTERVIEW DATE: April 30, 2013

FOCUS DATES: 1944, 1950s, 1960s, 2000s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4290

Interviewee's full name is Emma Morales Gilbert; she was born on October 29, 1944 in Charenton, Louisiana; Gilbert lives in Charenton and has lived there for about 38 years; when she was little, Charenton had gravel roads; the cane fields were the same, but the production of the sugar cane was a little different; they had tractors, but planting and harvesting the sugar cane was done by hand; now they use big cane cutters and it's dumped into the back of wagons and hauled to the mills; there are fewer mills than back then; when she was little, there were plenty of fireflies; they called them "lightning bugs"; used to catch them in jars at night so they could watch them; Gilbert says some of the sugar mills have disappeared because they can process the sugar cane a lot faster than they used to; they have better crops than they had back then because they use better fertilizer; the crops are a lot sweeter and taller; airplanes spray the tops of the cane so they can harvest earlier and not have to wait until there's a slight freeze and the cane gets sweet and the sucrose levels come up; when Gilbert was a child she would play outside a lot; her momma would read from the World Book Encyclopedia some of the stories that they had; she read to them every day; they had bathtubs that were hauled in the house to take a bath; they had water pumps from wells and cisterns; they had outhouses; didn't have electricity when she was little; Charenton got electricity when she was six or seven; they used coal oil/kerosene lamps and fireplaces for light; cooked on wood-burning stoves; growing up in Charenton was very quiet; didn't have much traffic; she climbed a lot of trees and played hide and seek; the old Frisco train used to pass by where she lived every day; you could tell what time it was by the train passing; when she was older, same train dove into the bayou, because the guy responsible for opening the tracks didn't do it in time and the train went into the bayou; her mom and dad used to speak French so the kids wouldn't understand what they were saying; stories about when her mom was little and going to school; if they spoke French, they got a paddling, so they only spoke French at home; she knows a few curse words and a few things in French, but not enough to carry on an intelligent conversation; first job was babysitting a neighbor's two children; she was twelve and made \$10 a week; today Gilbert is a hairdresser at her own beauty shop; Gilbert's mom never

held down a job; there were ten children in family; dad was a welder for different companies, including McWilliams Dredging Company on a dredge boat and McDermott in Morgan City; her dad put food on the table from the water when he was dredging but not as a fisherman; at one point after he retired, he ran hook nets and caught catfish and different types of fish; recreational crab fishing; for fun as a child Gilbert played hopscotch, jumped rope, made necklaces out of clover, played marbles, read comic books, and read a lot; they didn't have television until she was older; even when the TVs came out, they called it "snow," because it was all a fuzzy picture and lines across the television; you could catch a few horses once in a while running across the screen; Gilbert's family name is Morales, which was her dad's name; his parents came from the Canary Islands and settled in Donaldsonville, where most of his family still lives, around Donaldsonville and Plaquemine; her mom's name is Clements; they were from Nova Scotia and were Cajun French; they were evicted from Nova Scotia and came to Louisiana; from what she can gather, mom's family went to Nova Scotia on a ship from France then down to Louisiana on a ship; Gilbert says Charenton has changed since she was a child; the highways have been paved; bridges have been upgraded; can remember when there were planks across the bayou; you had to stay right on track to get over the bayou; schools have changed; the little school was a convent in Charenton; then they built the small school, Charenton Elementary; closed that and went to Mary Hines; the Catholic church on the corner burned and they rebuilt it; since the flood of 1927, they built the levees; they don't get flooded out any more; they used to have Charenton Beach, but since the levees were built up and they put weirs out by Morgan City, the silt has built up so there is no more beachfront; Gilbert thinks the summers are longer now than when she was little or they just got accustomed to air conditioning and notice the heat more now; Gilbert liked all of her childhood; her favorite memory was she had a good family life even though they didn't have a lot; she liked to go to Franklin for the picture shows; at the Center Theater and the Teche Theater; she saw Gabby Hayes on stage in Franklin at the Teche Theater; her favorite place now is at home; Gilbert thinks the Gulf is encroaching on their property; it's getting closer and closer; when she was young her greatest ambition was to live a long, healthy life, have a good job, and a family; greatest problem was trying to make good grades in school; greatest ambition now is to make a beautiful stained glass; thinks the only thing that can happen in this community is that it can get better; she'd like to see it stay rural; doesn't wish to live in a city; that's why they live in the boonies, because it's quiet and they have relative peace; the city is too rushed for her; they have more to do, but she's not looking for more to do at her age; she likes what she does at home: she likes to play in the yard, work with her stained glass, and do hair because every day is different; the people that come in are really good and interesting; the people in this area are basically good people; Gilbert's advice for young people in Charenton is to get an education, find a good place to work, and be happy with what you do, because then it's not going to feel like work; she wouldn't want to leave the area because people are nice to one another; when you go to another state, people don't even want to make eye contact, because they're scared you're going to want something; in this area, people go out of their way to be kind to other people.

TAPES: 1 (T4290)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 21 minutes

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OTHER MATERIALS: Video clips from interview

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