

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Donald Clement

COLLECTION: 4700.2355

IDENTIFICATION: Mississippi River boat pilot

INTERVIEWER: Mark Gibson

SERIES: LASG Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

INTERVIEW DATE: March 21st, 2013

FOCUS DATES: 1980s-2000s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4280

Clement has been captain on Mississippi River for last twenty-six years; been ‘foolin’ with the river since four years of age; father was forty-year U.S. Corps of Engineers man, now deceased; Grandfather was longshoreman until Clement was about thirty years old; has three uncles who were also Mississippi State river pilots; for most people whose families have worked on the river, it’s like it was born in you and you’ve been around it all your life; Clement says there are pieces of the river that he visited with his father as a child that no longer exist because they’ve been eroded; describes erosion that has occurred below 81 Mile Point and in the St. Elmo area near the Head of Passes; Head of Passes is twenty-two miles from actual Gulf of Mexico Southwest Pass sea buoy, where all of the passes join at the foot of the Mississippi River; Clement concerned about whether the land loss will ever stop and wonders if land will break up into large pieces and the river will take a new path; Clement says the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers were not ignorant, knew what effects their actions would have; most projects done were to help with coastal erosion and build back areas of land being depleted by erosion; explains Davis Crevasse and Caernarvon projects that divert water from river to marshlands; Clement says it has always been a constant battle to be proactive to help negate erosion; doesn’t know if anything that can be done to beat Mother Nature because she is amazing; Hurricane Katrina devastated marsh areas, changed shoreline and lower end of river, changed the lower end of the Mississippi, which effects bar and crescent pilots; saw a lot of that in his previous experience; became a pilot after nineteen years of working on harbor tugs on the Mississippi River; Katrina brought in salt water that killed the marsh vegetation; the roots of these plants hold all the marsh together; death of the marsh vegetation takes away plant structure that hold onto the mud; now when surges of water come in they wash away the mud more easily; problem is lack of government funding for efforts to combat situation; state does all it can as far as monetary allocation; big money; government is what handles all of these types of projects because most of it is done through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on federal level; the Corps has taken a black eye to all the stuff after Katrina; Clement has been around all of the different

projects all his life; the Corps are very diligent at what they do but can only be prepared for projects money is allocated for; they've done the best they could with what they have because there was such awareness brought to the problem post Katrina; they got away with it before because the big storm never came; when the big storm did come, there they were; he's listened to his father and his comrades and they talked about the possibility for years; Corps constantly monitored wind, coastal tide range, whether or not levees could withstand each storm; will this be big one? Hurricane Katrina was perfect storm; no one thought anything this catastrophic could possibly happen; big storms over the years: Camille, Betsy; those were the level of storms they compared, that was the big one; the Great Wall they built that closed MRGO [Mississippi River Gulf Outlet] and goes across Intracoastal Waterway, in some ways is good thing; in other ways, is all that is outside the great wall just going to go away? Explanation of successful projects like "Maurepas Marsh Project" in Lake Pontchartrain area; similar projects could be done elsewhere; bringing large boulders and then backfilling with mud (mud is free, need money to pump it); the mud didn't disappear, been washed out and spread out into the water area; all that mud is still there; it can be retained and pumped back in and those lands can be put back together again, but all of that costs money; Money is misallocated; Clement says there is no way we should let the Mississippi River take its natural course; we have to stay pro-active or lose footing every day; If the river ever takes a strong turn it will never be stopped; if we don't stay proactive by dredging, adding rocks, revetment and anything else as far as levees, we will never keep a handle on it; Explains how revetment crew contains Mississippi River up to the levees; when low water season starts, that operation goes into effect and they fix as much as they can until the water gets high again or the money runs out, whichever comes first; Clement estimates the dollar figure is astronomical; doesn't believe rest of the country sees the real problem; they don't live anywhere near the river and don't realize is that the river feeds the whole United States; anything you can find at a Wal-Mart comes up the Mississippi River on container ships. Clement says that because of the way his generation's parents were they were very proactive in getting their children a good education to be able to give them a good footing to start out, which gave the interviewers' parents a good start to give the interviewers a good start; says his generation still has a lot more work to do; with the technology of today (computer imagery), erosion, subsidence, and sea level rise can be combatted by the ability to monitor them much better than in the past; money is as much of a problem as where to go and what to do with the information after what needs to be fixed is known; there have been problems in the Grand Isle area for years and all of the sudden Grand Isle is almost a thing of the past; now everyone is saying 'oh my God it's about to be gone, so let's do something about it now!'; the bureaucracy of government and science it is a large battle, everyone has opinion and no one can seem to come to an agreement on how to fix it, how much money it will take, and what direction and how far to go with it; Clement has been around people from all over the country who have not been around the coast enough and are illiterate to what the real problems are; they don't realize one day all of this land could be gone and how the clothes on their backs, shoes they're wearing, laptop computer they're using will all get to them if there's no more river and no more influx of commodities; Clement says one day we will blink and it will be over with; there are a lot of proactive projects, but there are a lot of people out there who are against it all, saying that it's a waste of money; so many people who were in other parts of the world post-Katrina think 'why keep spending money on a place that's just going to wash away?' 'Why save the community?'; There's a lot more to the bigger picture; Louisiana is essential to nation's economy as well as the people; have to have infrastructure for the people and

something that will draw the people to Louisiana; need the people to be here to do the work, need the people to have a comfortable life; finally starting to see products that are really good: Nike Corporation has done a lot to build community back up in New Orleans and spent a lot of money towards Joe Brown Park, which is a really big sports complex, making it a vivid, giant sports complex; it all starts with the kids; if you can get these kids educated and have good morals, that's where it is; the guy who has a good education will be able to understand that we need these things; and that's a good place to start; the advocacy message has been received in New Orleans; initially a lot of people thought it was the Corps of Engineers' fault, and in some ways probably still think that, but when they really look at it and see that now, Mother Nature has taken its toll but there has been a change and money spent and allocated towards solving these problems; expensive changes to the levee system and pumping system; Clement says he thinks the MRGO project will surely help stop the water surge from coming in that would have raced up the Intracoastal Waterway and the backside of New Orleans; he is just not convinced what will happen with the marsh area and all of the stuff outside of that that also helps protect; at a very young age his father and his uncle took him on small work boats, he and his uncle were very close, he was a mentor in his life from a very young age, had a lot of common interests; uncle and father have made him what he is; both were involved in maritime industry and educated him to where he is today; Clement says as long as people need gas in their cars and clothes on their backs, a TV to watch, or any other commodity, they'll need somebody to move it, and that person is going to be him or somebody like him; his route is between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, so his ship could anchor at Bonnet Carre Spillway, Convent; before he became a pilot he worked it all on a harbor tug; Avondale Shipyard used to be hot place for harbor tugs; really big job in Avondale commonly needed ten boats there, meaning all of the work that was spread all over the place needed to be given to different tugboat companies, and all of those boats were brought to Avondale Shipyard to do Avondale's work; saw some really crazy things at Avondale Shipyard; after Exxon-Valdese accident, five-year moratorium, after five years everything had to be scrapped, or if a tanker, had to be double-hauled; explains double-hauling for remainder of interview.

TAPES: 1 (T4280)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 42 minutes

PAGES INDEX: 8 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Video clips from interview

RESTRICTIONS: Joint copyright is retained by the interviewee and interviewer and their heirs