

**T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection**

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Cyril Joseph Billiot

**COLLECTION:** 4700.0360

**IDENTIFICATION:** Houma Indian craftsman, wood carver and basket weaver

**INTERVIEWER:** Tom Ray

**SERIES:** Various Topics

**INTERVIEW DATE:** October 10, 1993

**FOCUS DATES:** 1920s - 1990s

**ABSTRACT:**

**Tape 516, Side A**

Interviewer Ray introduces Cyril Billiot and his daughter Evelyn; Billiot's trade is basket weaving; in the old days they made baskets to make money; baskets designed for clothes, gardening, shopping, kid's lunches; carving spears and tomahawks, also to make a little money; explanation of a musket, [moss gun?], or *mosquet*; fishing using a gig line; Billiot uses an axe and hatchet to make split cypress baskets, he doesn't soak the wood beforehand; has been making baskets since he was a child, he's eighty-two now; born in Louisiana; has three children: two sons, Easton and Ivy, and daughter Evelyn; his wife, Alfreddia, is from the Molinere family; you'd have to ask his mother if he made baskets or did carvings first; times were hard in those days but things were cheaper; corn baskets sold for fifty cents up to a dollar; corn baskets were used to carry corn to feed the mules or to hold clothes about to be hung to dry; smaller baskets sold for twenty-five cents; his animal carvings are of cats, dogs, horses, "everything"; from a Louisiana history book, he started carving the Statue of Liberty and Abraham Lincoln; his mother raised chickens, his dad was a farmer; he's the oldest one left in his family; in his carvings, he uses tupelo wood; he's been carving since he was nine or ten years old and "just a boy playing"; when he came to Houma, he learned from a man named Earl [Pierce?]; he first sold crab and crawfish carvings; other people in his family did woodcarving but they're gone now, including his brother, Peter, who was a musician; he taught his son, Ivy, how to carve; Ivy is a good painter as well; description of Houma Indian figurine he carved; Evelyn translates a question from Ray about the inspiration behind Billiot's carvings; he bases his carvings on how animals look, their color and shape; he'll carve particular figures if someone asks him to; animals in the bayou are his inspiration, like nutria, raccoons, alligators, frogs; those animals are still around but not as plentiful as they used to be; he's made crab and crawfish figures from cypress wood; describes an ashtray he designed and a basket style that his mother showed him; other Houma Indians made similar baskets; palmetto isn't strong enough for making functional baskets; describes various basket styles for use in gardening or shopping; a clothes basket called a barrel which is similar to a corn basket; Ray admires a fiddle; Billiot has made some fiddles out of cypress and white

maple; a tiny violin he made to pass the time; a violin he received as a gift from a carver at a festival in Cut Off, Bayou Lafourche; Billiot doesn't regularly take his work to craft festivals; he can carve a chicken in a day or two; he used to sit on his swing and carve but now he can't see or hear too well; uses a hatchet and pocket knife to carve, shows Ray a variety of tools; he gets wood from a lumberyard in Bayou Lafourche; Billiot made a pirogue for Ray; they had pirogues when Billiot was little; he could make any size pirogue or dugout, explains types of wood that would be used for that; he was raised on a farm; end of interview.

**TAPES:** 1 (T516)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 29 minutes

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** 35 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Inventory; Sketch of baskets and weapons; Photograph of Billiot and his carvings; Correspondence between Tom Ray and Pamela Dean

**RESTRICTIONS:** None