

Negotiating Heritage: Heritage Organizations amongst the Isleños of St. Bernard Parish,
Louisiana and the Use of Heritage Identity to Overcome the Isleño/Tornero Distinction

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The Isleños of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana trace their ancestry to eighteenth century settlers from the Canary Islands. Currently, St. Bernard Parish is home to two separate Canarian heritage organizations: Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society and the Canary Islands Descendants Association. This thesis examines how the Isleños are currently renegotiating their cultural identity through the use of heritage via the structure of heritage organizations. I argue that under mounting economic, environmental, and political pressure, people of Canarian descent in St. Bernard Parish have begun to adjust Isleño cultural identity in order to make it more widely inclusive. This is a creative means by which the Isleños attempt to maneuver around the increasingly rapid pace of change and deal with threats to the survival of their culture.

Keywords

Isleño, Tornero, St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, heritage, heritage organization, cultural identity, identity politics, Canary Islands

INTRODUCTION

Change is just on and on and it just keeps changing, and it seems to me, every ten years, it just changes on.

—Isleño informant¹(July 2008)

The Isleños of St. Bernard parish, Louisiana (see Appendix 1) are changing. Their relative isolation in lower St. Bernard Parish (see Appendix 2) made them obstinately resistant to change for almost two centuries. Despite this resistance, residents of lower St. Bernard Parish have seen their subsistence, employment, and dwelling patterns dramatically shift in the last twenty to fifty years. Advances in transportation and communication, as well as other economic, environmental, and political pressures, have all contributed to the accelerated rate of change. In the eyes of Isleños, such changes have been a threat to cultural survival. The primary vehicle through which the Isleños are attempting to preserve some aspects of their cultural identity is the heritage organization. Currently, St. Bernard Parish is home to two separate Canarian heritage organizations: Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society (LIS) and the Canary Islands Descendants Association (CIDA). This thesis examines how the Isleños are presently renegotiating their cultural identity through the use of heritage via the structure of heritage organizations.

Heritage is a concept that can be understood in at least two ways: emically and etically. According to Harris (1999), emic descriptions of culture refer to understandings of phenomena held by members of the cultural group. Etic descriptions of cultural phenomena are those formulated by outside observers and are intended to be objective understandings of cultural behavior. To a group interested in promoting their heritage, such as the Isleños, heritage is an amalgam of memories, artefacts, places, stories, and history that serve as a reminder of how things used to be. Emically, heritage is simply a celebration of the group's cultural identity that

connects them to a shared past. Etically, scholars who study the concept of heritage believe this amalgam serves as cultural and political resources in the present. As this thesis will demonstrate, neither one of these assertions is more correct than the other. Throughout this paper, it is crucial to understand that my Isleño informants generally think about heritage in less utilitarian terms than those set out by the social science literature. However, though they may not acknowledge it, Isleños do use heritage in the ways that social scientists describe.

The story of the Isleños is one of cultural adaptation to change, yet it also refutes the widely held belief of cultural homogenization via the forces of globalization. The Isleños have not passively succumbed to such forces, but have shown remarkable, if sometimes reticent, agency in redefining themselves in the ever-changing context of contemporary society. Their tale also illustrates the usefulness of heritage and heritage organizations, despite the beliefs of some scholars, such as Lowenthal (1996), who rue the selective nature of heritage narratives. Indeed, it is through the very use of heritage organizations that Isleños have struggled to renegotiate how they perceive themselves, as well as how they wish to be perceived by others. This thesis illustrates how the Isleños have utilized the selective nature of heritage and the structure of heritage organizations to make a gradual but significant shift in prevailing Isleño attitudes towards a deeply rooted, historical distinction between two kinds of Isleños, only one of which is considered to be genuinely Isleño.

The Isleños trace their ancestry to the Canary Islands. In the late eighteenth century, when Louisiana was ruled by Spain, the Spanish crown ordered the governor of the Canary Islands to recruit soldier-settlers to relocate to Louisiana in an attempt to protect the land from the nearby British in southwest Florida. These men, who were mostly married with families, jumped at the opportunity to leave the depressed economy of the Canaries. Though four

settlements were created, only the settlement in St. Bernard Parish retained a distinctly Spanish character. Upon their arrival, the Isleños were farmers. Given land in return for their service to the Spanish Crown, they worked a small fertile ridge near Poydras which increased in value as sugar refining became big business at the turn of the nineteenth century. Many Isleños were successful farmers. However, many others were either in debt or threatened by it, and sold their land as a result. Various marsh products, such as lumber, fish and wildlife, were being used by Isleños, both commercially and domestically, since their arrival. Those who sold their farmland moved farther south and east throughout the beginning of the nineteenth century, in order to make the exploitation of the marsh a primary source of sustenance and income (Din 1988).

Around this time in Isleño history, a distinction began to be made between those Isleños who moved to the lower parts of the parish (down-the-road), and those who remained around the original settlements as farmers (up-the-road), who came to be called Torneros. Tornero literally means “inhabitant of the Bend,” which refers to the bend in the Mississippi River near the settlements of Poydras and St. Bernard Village. Eventually the term Tornero came to be used to describe not only Isleños from near the bend, but also people in the upper parts of the parish. The Isleño/Tornero distinction is occasionally used today. More often, a roughly parallel distinction of down-the-road/up-the-road can be heard, often in a nostalgic and jocular manner. Despite its seemingly benign connotation today, Tornero was initially a derogatory term used to indicate those of Canarian descent who were perceived as mixing too easily with the French and other cultural groups in the upper parts of the parish.

In the last half century, various global forces and environmental and political pressures have altered the ability of many Isleños to live a down-the-road, marsh dwelling lifestyle. Consequently, many of these Isleños have taken to lifestyles more akin to those of up-the-road

people than ever before. As these down-the-road ways of life began to fade, some Isleños embraced the growing heritage movement that had begun to sweep small towns and communities across the United States in the 1970s. A brief discussion of the heritage concept is included in this paper. It is intended to sketch an outline of the inherently flexible and negotiated nature of heritage and heritage organizations, as well as to suggest the usefulness of heritage as a tool to work against globalization and other compounding environmental, political, social, and economic pressures.

The heritage promotion efforts of the two Canarian heritage organizations in St. Bernard Parish are addressed. Particular attention is given to the mid 1990s split within LIS that created conditions for CIDA to form. I hope to demonstrate that residual traces of the Isleños/Torneros, down-the-road/up-the-road distinction can perhaps be seen within these two organizations. This will help to illustrate the dynamic process of cultural identity renegotiation that is taking place as these two organizations attempt to merge after thirteen years apart.

To conclude, I argue that under mounting economic, environmental, and political pressure, people of Canarian descent in St. Bernard Parish have taken advantage of the selective nature of heritage and begun to blur the line between the Isleños/Torneros, down-the-road/up-the-road distinction in an effort to more effectively promote Isleños heritage. By making the Isleño identity more widely inclusive, members of the two organizations are ensuring their ability to work together in the future. The active renegotiation of the Isleño identity, which has been facilitated by the structured character of heritage organizations, should be seen as a creative means by which the Isleños attempt to maneuver around the increasingly rapid pace of change and deal with threats to the survival of the heritage.

The data presented in this thesis were procured using a number of research methods.

Ethnographic methods included participant observation at general membership and special meetings held by both LIS and CIDA from June 2008 through April 2009. Participant observation methodology was also used at various events pertaining to both organizations, such as festivals, fundraisers, and informal dinners. Original entrée into the Isleños community began in the fall of 2006. From these initial contact points, snowball sampling widened the number of Isleño informants over the course of two and half years. Twelve interviews, some recorded and transcribed, were conducted with individuals or groups of two. Many other informal conversations also took place over this extended research period. Additionally, much archival and historical research was conducted to locate books, articles, newspapers, and records relevant to the research topic. Of particular use was the Earl K. Long Library at the University of New Orleans, especially their Louisiana and Special Collections and Microform Research Collections.

THE STRENGTHENING OF A DISTINCTION

Los torneros

Yo conosco lo del Torno
porque andan en pandilla:
Lo que cobran la lisensia
con la chaqueta amarilla.
Lo del Torno no se' cuerdan
cuando eyo fueron probe:
Yenito'e sarna perro,
comiendo tronco de cole.
Si fueran y a recoger
lo que valen lo tornero:
Quitando y a Charly Estéb',
no yegan ni a quince sueldo.

Those People from the Bend

I know those people from the Bend;
they go around in gangs.
They're the ones who charge for licenses
and wear those yellow coats.
Those people from the Bend forget
the times when they were poor:
All covered with mange
and eating cabbage stalks.
If they were to add up
what all those guys are worth:
Except for Charlie Estévez,
it wouldn't be fifteen cents.

—Sung and translated by John Robin, at Yscloskey, October 26, 1975(Armistead 1992:35)

Décimas are narrative folk songs that were once widely composed and sung by Isleños, though they have declined greatly in the last half century as the use of the Spanish language has faded. As of this writing, there are only a few Isleños left who can sing these songs, and those Isleños who were considered the greatest *décima* composers and singers are now deceased. With translated titles such as “Mosquitos and High Water,” “Welfare Work,” “The Crab Fisherman's Lament,” “Shrimp Fishing,” and “Conservation,” these *décimas* covered a wide array of community-centered topics (Armistead 1992). These songs often offered accounts of local events and should be viewed as valuable social commentary. The *décima* above explains much about the once prevailing attitude that down-the-road Isleños had towards their up-the-road brethren.

The Isleño/Tornero distinction arose after a great number of Canarian settlers sold their

land to refashion themselves as marsh dwellers. However, even Isleños in the lowest and most remote settlement of Delacroix Island continued to farm high ridges of land until the 1930s, often having to transport mules and equipment by boat to secluded areas completely surrounded by water (Guillotte 1981:16). Clearly, occupational choices were not at the heart of the Isleño/Tornero distinction. The distinction appears to have begun as a way for the Isleños from down-the-road to differentiate themselves from their increasingly creolized up-the-road relatives, who had adapted to plantation life and consequently had more opportunities to mix with the French and other ethnic groups in the region. The longer this mixing took place, the less the Spanish heritage of Torneros remained evident.

Meanwhile, the down-the-road Isleños retained their Spanish character. This was possible for several reasons, mostly pertaining to their relative isolation in lower St. Bernard Parish, which provided them with a buffer from the outside French and English speaking world. Isleños have often reported to me that the continued use of the Spanish language as the primary language spoken at home was facilitated by the further isolation that families experienced when they would move into makeshift dwellings in the actual marsh during the trapping season. The St. Bernard Parish education system struggled to keep a school open in the lower parts of the parish, with an elementary school on Delacroix Island that was only intermittently open due to funding issues and damages from storms (Din 1988:129). With no consistent reinforcement of the English language taking place until the middle of the twentieth century, the Spanish language continued to be used.

The down-the-road Isleños' isolation also helped them to retain many of their Canarian traditions, along with a great deal of their folklore. Some traditional Isleños home remedies were still being practiced as late as the 1950s. One of my Isleño contacts told me about how one such

remedy, referred to as “taking the sun out,” was performed on him as a child when he developed a headache after long hours of playing outdoors. A local Isleña known for facilitating such remedies performed the ritual. She placed a towel on his forehead, flipped an open bottle of water over so that the opening was pressed against the towel, and said a silent prayer. In a somewhat embarrassed manner, the man told me, “I don't know if it was a coincidence, but I no longer had the headache.”

The Spanish character of the down-the-road Isleños was also periodically strengthened by influxes of additional immigrants from the Canary Islands and other parts of Spain into lower St. Bernard. A popular story told by some older Isleños is that there was a Spanish shopkeeper in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Spanish speaking immigrants would come to him for assistance, and he would direct them to Delacroix Island and other towns in lower St. Bernard Parish. One version of this story has the shopkeeper telling these immigrants: “Go over to the Island and those people will help you. They are good people and they will put you to work. Even if they don't have a job for you, they will feed you” (Guillotte 1981:17). Many of my Isleño informants can name at least one ancestor, oftentimes more, who came from mainland Spain after the initial settling of Canarians in Louisiana. The Isleños' isolation, in tandem with a steady influx of Spanish peoples, helped them to retain their distinct character for much of their history.

While the Spanish character of the down-the-road Isleños was remaining strong, the up-the-road Isleños were more susceptible to non-Spanish influences. As these Isleños became more entrenched in the plantation system, many down-the-road Isleños began to view them as servants to the French. Though it is impossible to know for certain, the term *Tornero* may have initially been a term to simply geographically tag a group of Isleños. However, as time wore on,

the farther removed Torneros became from the Spanish tradition, the more the term took on a demeaning connotation. The term became even more demeaning when certain Torneros, with better access to education in earlier times, became wealthy or powerful individuals in St. Bernard Parish. By the turn of the twentieth century, Torneros had become a mainstay in local politics, from school, levee, and drainage boards, to the state senate and house of representatives (Din 1988:135).

An almost tangible resentment hangs in the lines of the *décima* above. Though the *décima* was almost certainly written to be humorous, lines such as “they're the ones who charge for licenses,” and “Those people from the Bend forget the times when they were poor,” illustrate the crux of the Isleño/Tornero distinction at its most heated moment. The down-the-road Isleños were fiercely independent people who began to see Torneros become increasingly powerful actors within a system that sought to control them. One particular event in Isleños history that illustrates the cementing of this resentment is the Trappers' War, and the transfers of land ownership that surrounded it.

The Trappers' War

In the 1920s, the value of muskrat fur was on the rise as stocks of furs from Canadian trapping lands dwindled. This decline in Canadian furs happened to coincide with a rise in the popularity of fur coats among middle class American women, who much preferred the affordable muskrat to the more lustrous mink (Kane 1944:173). Isleños had been hunting and trapping in the marshlands of St. Bernard since they first settled there, and selling furs since at least the turn of the nineteenth century. At that time, muskrat pelts were worth only five to ten cents apiece to a trapper (Lowery 1974:25). However, with demand reaching unprecedented levels, by the early

1920s, the price had skyrocketed to nearly two dollars (Kane 1944:173).

The marshlands that the Isleños had trapped for about a century did not legally belong to them. The Swamp Act of 1850 gave ownership of the marsh to the state of Louisiana. The state government then sold much of this land to private individuals who mostly failed to pay property taxes on their holdings, thereby forfeiting ownership back to the state. The state then decided to grant sections of the land to the parishes and public boards. Until the price of furs rose considerably, the owners of the land were not particularly concerned with how it was being used. However, once the prices did rise, and owners realized there were trappers making large amounts of money off of their property, they began to charge leases to those who wanted trapping rights (Kane 1944:175). Isleños, many of whom did not speak fluent English, did not understand the changes taking place. In 1913 they united with more educated and Americanized Canarians to protect their interests in the St. Bernard Hunters and Trappers' Association (Din 1998:133). Into this setting walked Leander Perez, notorious Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parish political boss who, according to most historians, was always on the lookout for vulnerable targets for his nefarious schemes (Din 1988:153).

In the 1920s, Perez was the secretary of the St. Bernard Hunters and Trappers Association, but he handled all of the organization's business. The president and board of directors either spoke little English or did not possess the skills to run a corporation. Perez subleased 100,000 acres of trapping land from his brother, who had rented it for \$3000 annually. Collecting \$50 for membership and an additional \$50 for trapping rights from each member made Perez and his brother hefty profits during the 1925–1926 trapping season, which they partially reinvested in the ventures of various political cronies. Seeing an opportunity to make even more money off of the trappers the following season, the Perez brothers transferred the land

to J. Walker Michel, a Perez puppet, who would change the terms of the agreement with the association. Michel had to personally approve each trapper, and he raised the annual trapping fee to \$150. Making matters worse, he reserved the right to lease the land to non-association members (Din 1988:153).

Sensing that Perez was not looking out for their best interests, trappers approached Manuel Molero for help. Molero was an established Isleño bootlegger, merchant, and businessman who had gotten into the fur trade in 1915. By 1926 he purchased a three story fur processing warehouse on Decatur Street in the French Quarter, and operated under the name of Acme Fur and Trading. Molero had his attorney investigate the transfer of the trapping lands to Michel. A lengthy court battle ensued in which an Orleans district judge declared the transfer null and void, though his decision was overruled by the Louisiana Supreme Court, to whom Perez likely had illicit connections (Din 1988:154).

Meanwhile, confusion reigned over who could legally trap muskrats in the 1926–1927 season. Perez insisted that the Michel lease was still valid. He began to hire armed guards for the mostly outside trappers who had paid the \$150 fee. The Isleños vowed to trap regardless. They were being threatened and intimidated by Perez's thugs, but did their best to give as much as they got by burning down the trapping camps of the scab trappers brought in by Perez. Tensions between the factions finally boiled over on November 16, 1926. Just after dawn, some of Perez's men navigated an oyster boat to Delacroix Island. The boat was armed with two machine guns. The historical record is unclear about who fired the first shot, with each side accusing the other, but a gun battle did commence. From their superior position on the levee, the Isleños sustained no recorded injuries, but Perez's men suffered several, including one casualty. Having captured some of Perez's men, the trappers made them sign a statement declaring that

they had shot at the Isleños first. A group of Isleño men went to Plaquemines Parish in search of Leander Perez, with the intention of killing him, but he allegedly escaped across the Mississippi River by rowboat (Din 1988:154).

Because of this outbreak of violence, few outside trappers were willing to lease the land from the Perez/Michel faction, making it a losing investment. Shortly after the battle, they sold the land to Manuel Molero for \$800,000 (Jeansonne 1977:59). The nature of Molero's motive in this purchase is still a point of contention among some Isleños today. The general attitudes about him tend to be extreme. Molero was either a selfless supporter of the Isleños, or he was a rascal, no better than the other rich and powerful crooks made infamous throughout St. Bernard Parish history. According to a past officer of Delacroix Corporation, which is the name Molero's Acme Fur and Trading took in the late 1920s, Molero only purchased the land in order to ensure that the Isleños would be able to continue trapping where they had for several generations, and more importantly, to retain their way of life. He set up an arrangement with the Isleño trappers. Molero was to be the sole purchaser of trapped muskrats from his newly acquired land. Additionally, trappers would only have to pay a lease for 10 years, after which they would become the owner of their plot. Molero is on record as declaring, "I bought these lands for the trappers, and they will pay for it with the furs they get. They will pay me exactly what I paid for it. I want no profit" (*Item*, November 23, 1926).

However, Molero did profit. In the 1940s, oil was discovered on Delacroix Corporation land. The organization's board of directors was no longer interested in the fur trade, as prices for furs never again reached the highs of the 1920s. Obviously, oil was a more profitable choice. Molero opened up Molero Furs and leased land from Delacroix Corporation, which he in turn subleased to trappers (informant interview 7/11/08). Those who view Molero favorably suggest

that this is further proof of his unending support for the Isleños. One informant has stated that she believes the profits Molero made from his investments in the land were simply his reward for the goodwill he always showed towards the Isleños.

Those who view Molero unfavorably, justifiably or not, have an entirely different perspective. One Isleño informant told me about how the story of Molero's deal was passed down through his family:

This is the way my family told me it was because I was too small to even realize anything about the land. In other words, you bought, say, x amount of acres, and you were allowed to pay for this while you trapped the land. In other words, you'd keep paying notes and notes and notes and when you finally get it paid off, Molero would turn the land over to you. Well, the tale goes like this, and this is something I can't prove now, but my family told me when they bought their tract of land, and it came time for Molero to turn it over, evidently, we only got about half of what should have been ours. And not only did that happen to us. Plenty people bought this land, paid for it, and didn't get none. That's how come Delacroix Corporation has got so much land. I'm not saying how they got it, I'm just saying, you bought and paid for land, but they never turned it over to you. Plenty of people got half. Some people didn't get none. That's all up and down the Island, you talk to any old timer, and they'll tell you that story. If he liked you, you got half, if he didn't like you, you got none. You know I don't want to talk about somebody who I can't prove what I'm saying, but that's the word that goes around on that particular deal (informant interview, 10/21/08).

This story was reiterated time and again to me by down-the-road Isleños. Certainly more archival research could be done into the land transfers surrounding Molero's arrangement. However, what is most critical to take out of the above passage is the idea that this story is being passed on through generations. Whether all of the details are factually accurate or not, a negative and deeply rooted historical perception of Molero exists among some down-the-road Isleños.

Though Manuel Molero was originally from Delacroix Island, he did not remain there. By all accounts, he was not a formally educated man, but he was smart and business savvy. He

was considered affluent by Isleños standards before he formed Delacroix Corporation, and he only became more so after the discovery of oil. He ran for public office in St. Bernard Parish several times, and periodically made alliances with local political factions. Molero would have been seen as an up-the-road person by many from down-the-road. In his role as founder of Delacroix Corporation, he became one of the “ones who charge for licenses,” sung about in the *décima* above. Most down-the-road Isleños would also consider him one of the Isleños who “forgot the times when they were poor.” Perhaps this is why there were some Isleños who simply continued to poach, despite all of Molero’s efforts to help them trap legally. No matter what Isleños personally believe about Molero, he undoubtedly is one of the best-known figures in Isleños history, in which the Trappers War looms large. The war, and the land transfers surrounding it, helped to strengthen the Isleños/Torneros distinction in the twentieth century. Later we will see how the Molero family’s connection to current Isleños heritage promotion efforts has possibly brought some old feelings and resentments to the surface once again.

THE END OF DOWN-THE-ROAD

Let’s say that someone grew up somewhere where they never had hurricanes and all that. They can go back to their home town and if they played by, let’s say a big oak tree, which, I’ll never forget there was a big oak tree in the woods that had a fern inside and it was hollow, and I used to get in there when it rained and all that. Well if you grew up somewhere else, you go back to your hometown, you can say this is the oak tree I played on. I can’t do that, because it’s not there anymore. And just like the culture got lost, now the whole village is gone. It’s sad, but that’s what happened.

—Isleño informant, former Delacroix Island resident (July 2008).

The above Isleño informant acknowledges what he considers a loss of culture, by which he means an entire way of life. Indeed, the fishing villages that are now permanently stamped in

the memories of older Isleños are, for the most part, a thing of the past. The early settlements of down-the-road Isleños, such as Delacroix Island, Yscloskey, and Shell Beach, have largely been abandoned by Isleños, and are increasingly populated by the fishing camps of recreational fishermen (called “sports” by many Isleño fishermen). With the abandonment of these areas starting in the 1960s, and the subsequent resettlement in areas up-the-road, some distinct customs of the Isleños' way of life dwindled. As suggested by the first line of the informant's quote, hurricanes have featured prominently in the lives of Isleños, but they were not the sole factor in causing the migration of down-the-road Isleños from the lower parish. A variety of social, global, economic, and environmental factors both impeded the Isleños' continued reliance upon fishing, hunting, and trapping to make a living, while making the lower parts of the parish virtually uninhabitable. A consequence of this gradual migration has been a blurring of the line between Isleño/Tornero and down-the-road/up-the-road.

As roads improved and transportation over long distances was facilitated by the automobile, the lower parts of St. Bernard Parish became less remote. Perhaps the first consistent interaction these Isleños had with outsiders surrounded the fur trade, which required them to stay in contact with outside fur buyers. Additionally, as the fur trade boomed in the 1920s, the sudden spike in Isleño earnings brought with it traveling salesmen and curious gamblers, who were interested in getting Isleños to part with their money (Kane 1944:174–175). World War II resulted in many Isleños from throughout St. Bernard Parish enlisting in the army, serving tours of duty across the globe. Upon their return, though many were drawn to the shrimping industry, many others became interested in education and assimilation in American society. In this way, the end of the war was a turning point for the Isleños. Many younger Isleños were not interested in remaining isolated, but wanted to partake in more of what the

nearby urbanizing area had to offer (Din 1988:193). One of my informants, who grew up on Delacroix Island during the 1940s and 1950s, spoke about hitchhiking fairly often to New Orleans with his Isleños friends in order to attend dances and to listen to rock and roll music. Despite the youth's newfound curiosity about the outside world, the older Isleños were somewhat reticent to allow the outside world access to the lower parish. The informant's father, for instance, waited a very long time to get a television set, though he did eventually buy one.

Environmentally, St. Bernard Parish has been challenged consistently by the interests of big business. The discovery of oil and gas in the parish spelled immeasurable destruction for the marsh and the lower Isleños' way of life. The exploration and drilling practices of oil and gas companies required them to dig innumerable channels and canals throughout the marshes, destroying land and speeding up its further erosion. Shipping interests in New Orleans also played a role in the destruction of the marsh and in the skewering of the parish when it pushed for the construction of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MR-GO), a sixty-seven mile long shipping channel that would provide a direct route from the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans.

As early as 1938, New Orleanian and engineer Robert Kuhn was drawing up plans for such a channel (*St. Bernard Voice*, August 7, 1943). However, it was not until 1947 that the proposed channel sparked the interests of New Orleans businessmen and politicians. In March of that year, a three-day public hearing was held by the United States Army Corps of Engineers about the channel in the University Room of The Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans. Several *Times-Picayune* articles covering the hearings note those in attendance as “valley leaders,” with titles such as governor, mayor, and senator. Members of the Foreign Trade Council, as well as members of Chambers of Commerce from various cities were also in attendance. By all accounts of the meeting, residents of St. Bernard Parish were not invited to participate. The

project had wide support from those in attendance (*Times-Picayune*, March 6, 1947).

Residents of St. Bernard Parish were mostly opposed to the construction of the channel, which would cut the parish in half. They were stifled by the promises of business interests, who swore the channel would bring development and growth to St. Bernard. With little regard for the interests of the residents, Congress authorized the channel in 1956. A coalition of residents demanded that environmental studies be conducted to measure the channel's potential impact on the parish. A 1958 United States Department of the Interior report stated that completion of the channel would negatively impact St. Bernard Parish in the form of “major ecological change and widespread ecological consequences” (*Times-Picayune*, October 24, 2005). The Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, an organization that was never called upon to comment on the channel, found that the shrimp industry alone would stand to lose \$20 million annually if the channel was completed. Their report prompted an editorial in the *St. Bernard Voice* newspaper entitled, “Is St. Bernard Parish Doomed” (January 3, 1958). Despite such reports, the Corps of Engineers began construction in 1958. A partial channel was completed in 1963, and MR-GO reached its full dimensions in 1968.

MR-GO, along with oil and gas pipeline canals, allowed salt water from the Gulf of Mexico to make its way into the waterways surrounding and winding through St. Bernard Parish. This salt water intrusion destroyed land by eating away 18,000 acres of land and 1,500 acres of cypress swamp. According to conventional wisdom, these were thought to be merely conservative estimates (*Times-Picayune*, September 13, 2005). Some estimates suggested figures as high as 27,000 acres of wetland loss. Oyster beds were eaten away by the salt water, crippling the oyster industry (*Times-Picayune*, January 08, 2006). Salt water intrusion is also responsible for the creation of “dead zones,” or bodies of water devoid of oxygen (*Times-*

Picayune, October 18, 1997). In these expanses of water, no wildlife can be sustained. Details emerged from many interviews with Isleño informants indicating that lush cypress forests once existed near Delacroix Island. Any casual observer could travel there today and see that barely a trace of such a forest exists. Clearly, the operations of outside business interests have drastically altered the ecological landscape of St. Bernard Parish and played a role in the demise of the Isleños hunting, trapping, and seafood industries.

Various global economic factors have also played a role in the decline of the seafood industry. The increase in seafood imports has driven supply up so far that seafood buyers are offering drastically lower prices to fishermen than ever before. The sharp rise in fuel prices also has made the cost of running a boat unmanageably high. This rise of foreign imports and fuel costs has made it practically impossible for an Isleño fisherman to turn a profit. According to one of my Isleño informants:

This time of the year, the crabs should be worth a minimum of 55, 60 cents. They're worth 25. I get on my phone, you're sitting in my office with me right now, my phone don't ring. And what happened, to scale it down for you, is bait is \$30 for 100 pounds of bait. They were paying as much as \$2.80 to \$3.00 a gallon for fuel. So when a man leaves the dock, if he's got \$200 worth of expense, and I'm paying him 25 cents per pound for product, and he comes in and he's got three or four hundred pounds of product, or 500 pounds, he's making 25, 30 dollars a day. He's running a boat worth thirty-five or forty thousand dollars, if he's got a skiff type boat, and he can't make it. I should have right now, I should have twenty-five to thirty boats working. We have nine that's got traps in the water, and like today, I have one out (interview 10/17/06).

Such unfavorable conditions in the seafood market have forced many Isleños out of the seafood business altogether.

Hurricanes are an accepted part of life for Isleños, as they are for everyone in southeastern Louisiana. However, the operations of the oil and gas industry, as well as the construction of MR-GO, have exacerbated the impact that hurricanes have on the Isleños by

speeding the erosion of the marsh. Outlying marshland acts as a natural buffer against hurricanes. Hurricanes strengthen over water, and weaken over land, meaning the more land that exists between a community and the Gulf of Mexico, the less powerful a hurricane will be once it reaches that community. Additionally, the growing height of water as it is forcefully pushed towards the shore by a hurricane's powerful winds is called storm surge. Particularly for communities that are connected to the Gulf by numerous waterways, such as much of lower St. Bernard Parish, the loss of marshland has been devastating. With less of a buffer left to absorb the storm surge, many coastal communities are now virtually guaranteed to flood even from minor storms.

In 1965 Hurricane Betsy brought with it flood waters of up to 12 feet, especially in low-lying areas. Much of lower St. Bernard Parish was simply devastated, including all of the homes on Delacroix Island (Din 1988:198). Though some Isleños returned to stoically rebuild the lower parish, many began to migrate further north and away from the marsh. Most chose to stay within St. Bernard, but simply moved up-the-road, either to the areas near Poydras and St. Bernard Village, where the Isleños first settled upon their arrival from the Canary Islands, or even further north to the growing suburban bedroom community of Chalmette. Even as this gradual migration out of the lower parts of the parish began, the tightly-knit character of the down-the-road Isleños communities remained somewhat intact. Because so many Isleños began to move to common areas, some semblance of community life could continue, even into the early twenty-first century. However, in August 2005, Hurricane Katrina made it clear that nowhere in St. Bernard Parish could be considered safe from storms.

Hurricane Katrina covered about 95% of St. Bernard Parish with water (*Times-Picayune*, September 13, 2005). The flood waters came primarily from enormous breaches in the levees

bordering MR-GO. Over the decades, the massive amount of wetland loss caused by MR-GO and oil and gas pipeline canals reduced the amount of land available to act as a buffer zone between the Gulf and neighborhoods in St. Bernard and other surrounding parishes (*Times-Picayune*, October 24, 2005). Katrina was responsible for the displacement of all Isleños from the parish. Though no actual statistics exist, my Isleño informants have estimated that to date about 75% of Isleños have returned to St. Bernard Parish, though they are more scattered throughout the parish than ever before. They also estimate that only about 5 to 15% of Isleños have returned to the lower parts of the parish. This massive upheaval in demography has accelerated a geographical dislocation that was already taking place before Hurricane Katrina. For many Isleños, such as the two quoted below, this is the first time they are not living in close proximity to their families.

I think that's the part that everybody's missing. You know it's not just homes that's gone. It's families that are being... my sister's not coming back... I have cousins that aren't coming back. And for the first time in my life, we're scattered. We all lived right here, within a mile of one another, and for the first time in our life, everybody's gone. Everybody's scattered. And I can't even begin to tell you what anybody could do to help that part, because I don't know if there is anything (interview 11/3/06).

That part of the Isleños deal is busted up pretty good, but Betsy came here and wiped this place out, and now Katrina came and did it again. Betsy took a big percentage of families out of here and moved them up to the St. Bernard area. Now Katrina came and finished the job (interview 10/17/06).

There is no longer a significant Isleños occupancy in most of the lower villages in St. Bernard Parish. Ironically, the culture that developed at these locations is what most people commonly think of as being representative of Isleños culture. Essentially, most of the villages that once made up the down-the-road area no longer exist, or do so as a mere shadow of their former selves. Delacroix Island, Yscloskey, and Shell Beach still lie in ruins, and where

development can be seen, it is usually the work of recreational fishermen. With so few Isleños living down-the-road, it is no wonder that the Isleño/Tornero distinction has been in decline since the first migrations of the late 1960s.

Despite the waning of the Isleños/Tornero distinction, I hope to demonstrate that residual traces of it are still present in the perspectives of older Isleños. As the majority of participants in the Isleños heritage movement are 50 years of age and older, it is not surprising that traces of the Isleños/Torneros distinction can perhaps be seen in some of the inevitable conflicts that take place among the members of a diverse heritage organization. In the section below, the heritage concept as it pertains to the Isleño experience is explored.

HERITAGE: A BRIEF DISCUSSION

Bernie Acosta sits beside me on the couch in his living room, where he has gathered materials, mostly photos and magazine clippings that he thought would be of interest to a student anthropologist. The surrounding walls are covered in framed photos of Bernie with other members of Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society. They are all dressed in the traditional clothing of the Canary Islands, the place to which they trace their ancestry. There are also paintings and posters, mostly of scenic marshes or majestic work boats, which nostalgically recall the lived experiences of the Isleños in times not so long ago. As we begin, he is eager to tell me a story about his grandfather. He picks up a copy of John M. Barry's *Rising Tide*, the story of the 1927 Mississippi River flood that ravaged much of St. Bernard Parish, turns to page 237 and points to a short passage that reads: "On April 20, 1923, a caravan of three large trucks loaded with Claude Meraux's liquor started toward New Orleans. At a narrow bridge, three deputies ordered them to stop. Two of the deputies were shot. One of the trucks drove over their

bodies, killing them” (Barry 1997:237). Bernie tells me in a soft voice, “my mother told me that one of the deputies that was killed was my grandfather, and that the person doing the killing was actually Claude Meraux himself.”

This story is a small part of Bernie's larger heritage narrative, through which he prioritizes his Canarian ancestry and claims an Isleño identity. Among the Isleños of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, such heritage narratives are about as varied as one could imagine. Though throughout much of the collected Isleño folklore (Armistead 1992), a popular image exists of an Isleño as a marsh dweller who makes a living from the bounty of the bayou, this characterization has less to do with actual history than it does with heritage. In fact, many who claim an Isleño identity today have never lived such a lifestyle, and neither did many of their ancestors. This portion of Bernie's heritage narrative gives us a glimpse of what some down-the-road Isleños may have once considered a nontraditional or inauthentic Isleño lifestyle. Bernie's grandfather was a deputy, and not a fisherman. He lived near the turn of the Mississippi river, and not close to the marshes. Partially as a result of his grandfather's murder, Bernie's father chose to move even farther north to the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. He attended business school on Jackson Avenue. Bernie has lived in New Orleans, Arabi, and Philadelphia in his lifetime, and has made his living as an artist and tour guide in the French Quarter of New Orleans. He clearly does not fit the most common characterization of an Isleño made popular through Isleño folklore, yet he is one of the most active members in Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society, and most strongly identifies with the Isleño portion of his heritage. How can an Isleño identity be claimed simultaneously by individuals with vastly different lived experiences? The answer perhaps lies in the inherently flexible and negotiable nature of the heritage concept.

Agency in Heritage Negotiation

The concept of heritage is important in the story of the Isleños because as their largely autonomous and self-sufficient communities have been broken apart by the various economic, social, and environmental pressures, heritage organizations have become the primary means by which Isleños perpetuate certain aspects of their culture. Heritage scholars (Timothy and Boyd 2006) most commonly agree that, in broad terms, heritage is the present day use of the past. More specifically, others have regarded heritage as “referring to the ways in which very selective past material artefacts, natural landscapes, mythologies, memories and traditions become cultural, political and economic resources for the present” (Graham and Howard 2008:2). Regardless of the relative specificity of a definition of heritage, at its crux lies a focus on the present. Despite this present-centeredness in popular conceptualizations of heritage, an even more critical understanding of its full implications lies in the fact that “heritage whilst ostensibly about the past, is always about the future. About having a future and the recognition that those excluded or marginalized from this discourse are also being denied one” (Rowlands 2002:113).

The efforts of some to take control of their present and future through heritage have been chronicled in case studies and ethnographies across the social science literature. In Kathleen Adams’ (2006) vivid portrayal of the Sa’dan Toraja of Sulawesi, Indonesia, she describes how art and heritage can become tools to make sense of and dictate one’s place in history and the world. The Toraja engage with heritage primarily through the robust heritage tourism industry that has enveloped their villages and towns. Though many Toraja embrace the financial opportunities that the tourism trade offers, they struggled with making sense of their increased interaction with the global economy as traditional ways of life and art dwindled or were bastardized in efforts to make them more marketable for tourism. Adams borrows heavily from

the work of James C. Scott (1985), suggesting that the Toraja began to use their art for “surreptitiously critiquing established ethnic, colonial, or political hierarchies (Adams 2006:28). The activities of the Toraja suggest a high degree of human agency in the characterization of a heritage. If heritage is negotiable and actively shaped by human actors, it should also be considered context dependent.

The negotiable nature of heritage can also be seen in the shifting identity of the Houma Indians of southern Louisiana. According to Davis (2001), this particular group has had difficulty in gaining recognition as Native Americans by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which has determined that there is no evidence indicating a significant connection between these Houma and the Houma represented in the historical record. In fact, as Davis points out, all evidence seems to point toward these Houma being descended from a mixture of Europeans, African Americans, and non-Houma Native Americans. Davis’ research into the group suggests that their ethnogenesis arose out of social mores and marriage laws that once prohibited the union of whites and blacks, but were more lenient with the mixing of either whites or blacks with Native Americans. By claiming to be of primarily Native American descent, they were actively favoring some part of their ancestry and heritage in order to characterize themselves in the manner most beneficial to the survival of their community. Similar stories of ethnogenesis and heritage construction exist across a wide swath of Native American groups. In many cases the contemporary configurations of Native American groups have been created from the consolidation of many separate and diverse tribes (Campbell 2001).

The Cajuns are perhaps a particularly relevant example of a group whose members have characterized themselves in different ways across many chapters of many separate heritage organizations, given their close proximity and often parallel experiences to the Isleños.

According to Esman (1985), much like the Isleños, the Cajuns are experiencing a cultural paradigm shift due to various global, political, and environmental pressures forcing them to abandon traditional ways of living, yet they have managed to hold fast to their ethnic heritage and character. They have done so despite an internal division that in some ways parallels the Isleño/Tornero, down-the-road/up-the-road distinction among the Isleños. There are the urbanized wealthy elite, who refer to themselves as “Acadian,” and there are the rural farmers and fishers, who generally claim a “Cajun” label. On occasion, the more crass “coonass” is used to refer to the latter group, though not all “Cajuns” are as appreciative of the title as others. Despite class differences, Acadians and Cajuns successfully share a common heritage, and consistently work together to support the myriad Cajun festivals that take place throughout the year. Esman argues that heritage festivals reflect important cultural values and are “instrumental in the perpetuation of ethnic group identity” (1982:200). Esman’s work suggests that regardless of internal differences within an ethnic group – even differences that may lead to heated conflicts – neither heritage, nor ethnicity, is so rigid a construct that the conflicted groups cannot reach some consensus about what is best for the promotion of the group as a whole.

As the examples above suggest, within the context of globalization, the active reconstruction of identity has become, for many communities, a standard mode of making sense and dealing with the shift from relative isolation to routine interaction with a wider realm of cultural, political, and economic entities. Ina and Rosaldo suggest that there are no passive consumers of imported cultural goods and ideas, but that these imports are “interpreted, translated, and appropriated according to the local conditions of reception” (2008:18). Heritage construction works in a similar fashion: as an expression of globalization and other compounding pressures, not merely as a reaction to them (Sylvain 2008).

Making Heritage More than History

Arjun Appadurai (1996) draws attention to the increasingly common preoccupation with belonging that has resulted from the recent expansion of global flows. The “production of locality,” Appadurai argues, is central to the negotiation of identity, as it sets and resets flexible boundaries and borders in order to delineate distinctions between us and “other.” A locality, which Appadurai considers as “primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial (1996:178),” is often actively produced through the efforts of heritage groups or organizations, as well as through the interactions between group members. In other words, a locality does not necessarily correspond to a specific location, but rather to a certain conceptualization of who can belong to a group and who cannot, as it has been tentatively decided through interactions between established members of the group.

The primary means by which Isleños have embraced and promoted their heritage is the voluntary heritage society, and it is mostly via two separate Canarian heritage societies that Isleños take part in the “production of locality.” Robert Lowie perhaps first described the essence of such organizations in his work on sodalities. Though he specialized in secret or exclusive societies in tribal cultures, his explanation of such societies remains remarkably apropos in the context of contemporary heritage societies. Lowie writes:

Aims and functions change in these associations, and their very composition may be revamped. They arise in response to certain needs, whether sentimental, social, economic, or religious, and are inevitably affected by coexisting institutions and folkways (1948:294).

As I will show below in an account of Isleños heritage organizations, the aims and functions of these organizations change, or more accurately, the members of these organizations actively adjust their aims and functions, as they are confronted with various external challenges. Heritage and heritage organizations, much like culture, ethnicity, and tradition, does not exist within a

vacuum. It is negotiated, debated, contextually driven, and just as much affected by changing circumstances as it is an effective means to deal with them (Linnekin 1983; Yount, Tsiazonera, and Tucker 2001).

Historian and geographer David Lowenthal rues the flexibility of heritage. He argues that the meaning of heritage has shifted in the last 50 years. Reflecting the shared roots of the words *heritage* and *inheritance*, heritage once “dwelt mainly on heredity, probate law, and taxation; it now features antiquities, roots, identity, belonging” (Lowenthal 1996:3-4). In other words, the idea of heritage once pertained to titles or property that was legally inherited from parents. Heritage has grown to “embrace bequests from remote forebears and cultural legacies in general” (Lowenthal 1996:4). Lowenthal argues that, in their quests to claim a particular heritage, people have often become abusive of history in the following way. While most scholars agree that both history and heritage are biased and imperfect recollections of the past, Lowenthal suggests that historians and proponents of heritage differ in that their attitudes towards this bias. While historians supposedly strive for an objectivity that they can, admittedly, never truly achieve, promoters of heritage embrace bias by sanctioning and strengthening it (1996:122). In Lowenthal’s eyes, heritage is a declaration of faith in the past, and thus is not open to critical analysis or comparative scrutiny, as is history. Lowenthal argues that heritage, in its neglect to account for bias, thrives on historical error. Therefore all heritage narratives tend toward the completely fallacious or selectively fabricated. He also believes that the proliferation of heritage movements does history a disservice and prevents us from learning from the past, which is in his mind the main purpose of gaining historical understandings of events.

In their use of heritage and heritage organizations, the Isleños demonstrate that Lowenthal’s ideas about heritage may be shortsighted. Heritage can be an extremely useful tool

by which people creatively engage presently shifting contexts. The Isleños most often rely upon their own memories of past traditions, events, and episodes to create their heritage narratives. Some also make it a point to read much of the formally written history of the Isleños, though it is not uncommon to hear an Isleño suggest that a historian's account is inaccurate. On several occasions, one of my Isleño informants recommended that I read *Deep Delta Country* (1944) by Harnett T. Kane. Each time, he reminded me that I should only bother with the book if I could locate a first edition copy. He suspected that the publisher was pressured by various political forces to alter all subsequent versions, in order to make it less critical of certain people and political factions. This reflects a general attitude of distrust toward those in positions of power that is common amongst people of lower St. Bernard Parish. It also demonstrates that my informant recognizes history as written by people in positions of power. Therefore, it is perhaps understandable that Isleños may not share Lowenthal's level of faith in formal history. To Isleños, memories, both personal and those that are passed down generationally, supplement the information that they glean from formal accounts of history.

Memories, whether of the individual or collective variety, offer merely incomplete accounts of the past, yet this does not negate the meaning and value of the narratives they help to create for the Isleños who possess them. Lowenthal thinks that people should learn from the past, and there is no evidence to suggest that the Isleños are not doing so. However, they are also doing more, by creatively making the past work for them. By reworking what it means to be an Isleño, they are adjusting their perspective of the past in order to face current challenges. As suggested earlier, heritage should be seen as "a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995:370). In other words, heritage produces and creates something new, whether it be new ideas about the character of the group or new

configurations amongst its members, by adding value to past traditions, values, or ways of life that, quite routinely, become increasingly obsolete as circumstances shift.

Given the deeply rooted and historical nature of the Isleño/Tornero distinction, the Isleños were bound to encounter internal differences in their heritage promotion efforts. By examining such challenges, we can get a sense of how heritage, despite occasionally being a site of conflict amongst the Isleños, also serves as a flexible means by which to carry them into the future. In the following account of Isleños heritage organizations in St. Bernard Parish, I hope to demonstrate how the Isleños have not only used heritage as a means by which to slow the rapid pace of change, but also as a tool to negotiate who they are and to actively modify the boundaries of the Isleño identity.

CANARIAN HERITAGE ORGANIZATIONS IN ST. BERNARD PARISH

In the 1970s, many St. Bernard residents of Canarian descent were aware of their Spanish heritage, particularly older down-the-road Isleños, most of whom still had vivid memories of the Spanish traditions that had only recently begun to fade. Indeed, the abundance of Spanish surnames in the parish would give cause to even the most uninformed resident to wonder about the parish's Spanish connection. However, historian Alcee Fortier (1904) revealed in his interviews with Isleños that by the mid-nineteenth century, many Isleños did not know that their ancestors came from the Canary Islands. One of my informants indicated that in the 1950s, the term *Canary Islands* was familiar to people at Delacroix Island, but he also stated that he was not sure if people really knew much about them. Growing up near the marsh, he described how he understood the Canary Islands in his youth:

When I was a child I heard of the Canary Islands because the older folks would speak of them,

but I was a child and I remember little things like they had ponds out in the marsh, and we'd paddle pirogues, and I was a little thing, and there were little islands in these ponds and we used to name them. Well I always thought that the Canary Islands were named for the bird, and I'll never forget when we passed through this pond, they had quite a big island, and there were a lot of birds on it, laying eggs in there, so us kids named that island, the Canary Islands, because of the birds (informant interview 7/25/08).

Though this excerpt recounts a child's understanding of the Canary Islands, it reflects the larger ambiguous conception of the islands that many older Isleños possessed as well.

Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society

In 1967, Frank Fernandez was appointed St. Bernard Parish Historian. Born in 1918, to a Spanish immigrant father and Isleña mother, Fernandez had always been interested in his Spanish heritage. As historian, he researched the Canarian descent of St. Bernard Parish families, demonstrating the significant connection between early St. Bernard settlers and the Canary Islands. Fernandez's research created enthusiasm amongst some Isleños, who increasingly began exploring their heritage. The Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society² (LIS) formed in 1976. A year later, LIS held its first ever pilgrimage to the Canary Islands, during which the organization established relations with the Canary Islands' government that remain intact to this day.

Judging from what I have been told by informants, LIS was founded primarily by Isleños who were associated with down-the-road. Their original bylaws emphasized the importance of the communities at the lower end of the parish. To be eligible for membership in LIS, one had to be either of Spanish descent, or of any descent but a resident of Reggio, Florissant, Yscloskey, Woodlake, Hopedale, Shell Beach, or Delacroix Island (Guillotte 1982:87). The emphasis on these down-the-road settlements suggests that territory may be as important as genealogy in

defining cultural identity. Such an idea has been previously suggested in a different context by Stanley Tambiah. He defined ethnicity as “a self-conscious and vocalized identity that substantializes and naturalizes one or more attributes—the usual ones being skin color, language, religion, and territory—and attaches them to collectivities as their innate possession and myth-historical legacy” (1996:168). Ted Lewellen points out that within Tambiah’s definition, “the crucial components are ideas of inheritance, ancestry and descent, a territory or place of origin, and at least some shared sense of kinship” (2003:167).

In the 1970s, when the Isleños formed LIS, territory seems to have been an especially important factor in determining who could be considered an Isleño. This is evidenced by a number of non-Spanish surnames, such as Serigne and Robin, which through intermarriage and processes of assimilation into the lifestyle of down-the-road Isleños, have become accepted as Isleños names. In his 1982 ethnography of the Isleños, Joseph Guillotte suggested that “implicit in the club (LIS) statement about membership, is the fact that those who became fishermen and trappers are the only true Isleños and the ones most eligible for membership in a society which stresses ethnicity derived from Spanish descent” (88). The provision that allowed people who were not of Spanish descent to join LIS, as long as they were from down-the-road, further suggests that these down-the-road settlements were considered somehow inherently Isleño. Regardless of one’s genealogical background, just being from one of these places and adapting to the marsh lifestyle seems to have instilled one with enough of an Isleño essence to be considered fully Isleño, perhaps even more so than some up-the-road Isleños who possessed more concrete genealogical ties. LIS’ emphasis on these locations suggests certain ideas that were indicative of the founders’ way of conceptualizing Isleño identity. However, as time progressed, and more people who represented an up-the-road way of life joined the organization,

these ideas were challenged.

In 1980, members of the Molero family donated the late Manuel Molero's last St. Bernard Parish residence, and its surrounding land, to LIS. The property had remained in the family's possession after Molero moved to a house in New Orleans. Despite the wide variety of opinions concerning Molero held by Isleños, this donation by the Molero family seems to have been welcomed by many. Frank Fernandez had been expressing the organization's need for a museum since nearly its inception. This nineteenth century cottage could serve just that purpose. However, this donation also facilitated a transition of LIS activity from Delacroix Island to up-the-road at St. Bernard Village. Though it was probably a much more convenient location to reach for most members of the organization, as this was after Hurricane Betsy and many Isleños had moved nearer to the turn of the Mississippi River, meeting at Delacroix likely held symbolic meaning that helped to further link the Isleños to the fishing and trapping down-the-road lifestyle.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the LIS developed various programs and events in the parish. Shortly after receiving the donation of museum grounds, the organization donated it to St. Bernard Parish Government, in an effort to guarantee that the building and grounds would be maintained, regardless of the organization's financial circumstances. There was also some hope that the government would help the LIS through its various tourism promotion efforts. The parish government reached an agreement with Jean Lafitte National Historical Park to develop the museum, which placed the National Park Service in charge of exhibits and maintenance. The members of LIS still played a central role in determining the direction of the museum, and docents at the museum were club members.

LIS used their contacts in the Canary Islands to bring Canarian public officials,

musicians, and dancers to St. Bernard Parish. Members of the organization also made semiregular trips to the Canary Islands, in order to further explore their heritage. LIS developed a large presence at the annual blessing of the fleet, where fishing and shrimping vessels and their crews took part in a religious ritual to help ensure a successful catch. A scholarship program was developed for students of Isleño descent. Local schools were invited to bring classes of students to the museum for educational field trips that encouraged them to investigate their Spanish heritage. These are just some of the activities in which LIS was involved as it grew.

One of the founding members of LIS was the late Irvan Perez. Upon his death in 2007 at the age of eighty-five, a close friend of Irvan remarked that, “he was a scholar of the culture; he shared it with everyone” (Times Picayune 1/12/2008). Perez was dedicated to the effort of recording the waning aspects of Isleño culture, and was one of the last great *décima* singers and composers. In 1988, he recorded seventeen *décimas* with the Louisiana Folklife Center, funded by a grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. They were initially available on cassette tapes, and were finally released on compact disc in 2004. He was also a talented artist, avidly carving colorful decoy ducks, a skill he learned in his youth residing on Delacroix Island. During his lifetime, he performed *décimas* at Carnegie Hall, had samples of his carvings set on display at the Smithsonian Institute, and was inducted into the Louisiana Folklife Hall of Fame. In 1991, he was the recipient of a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts meant to aid him in furthering his work. His efforts helped to increase national exposure of the Isleños, though some LIS members thought that even more could have been achieved with a more coordinated effort between Irvan and the organization. One informant, who is currently one of the most active members of LIS, said that because of Irvan’s fame, he had many opportunities to meet with various dignitaries and to promote not only Isleños folkways, but also

the efforts of the rest of the organization. She claimed that due to a lack of coordination between Irvan and LIS, the organization would often miss out on many great promotional opportunities, and only hear about Irvan's various works afterward on television or in the newspaper.

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, as these concerns began to develop, the makeup of the officials of LIS began to gradually shift, with more up-the-road members of the organization running in and winning elections. This can possibly be explained in the following manner. As the activities of LIS increased, with some members pressing ever harder for national exposure, the responsibilities of the officers became somewhat more sophisticated. In general terms, up-the-road Isleños received more formal education than their down-the-road brethren, which in some ways better prepared them to take on these responsibilities. However, down-the-road Isleños could be seen as being more in touch with the traditional Isleños ways of life. In most cases they have been removed from down-the-road territories for a shorter length of time, and are often still attached to some aspects of a marsh way of life. Obviously, they also played a critically important role as traditional culture bearers in heritage promotion efforts.

Another notable distinction being made between the up-the-road and down-the-road Isleños was along political lines. With an increasingly large membership, the LIS began to be seen as a voting bloc by various political factions within St. Bernard Parish. Most Isleños have stories to tell of St. Bernard politicians attempting to buy votes from residents by delivering loads of shells for their driveways, or allowing them use of parish machinery for work on private property. Politicians would also get involved with organizations around town in order to try to win votes, provided the organization had a significantly sized membership. In 1995, the race for the First District State Senate seat made an impact on LIS. The contenders for the seat were St. Bernard Parish President Lynn Dean and incumbent Senator Sammy Nunez.

Dean was a Republican with ties to the lower parts of the parish, where he was a businessman and entrepreneur. He possessed an eccentric, no nonsense style that aided his run for parish president as a reformer and that appealed to many of the independently minded, down-the-road Isleños, who tended not to trust deeply entrenched career politicians. Nunez was just that, having been first elected to the State Legislature in 1964. He was generally more aligned with the attitudes of the *slightly* more liberal residents of the upper parish. During the campaign, Dean began attending LIS general membership meetings. Soon, Nunez was not far behind, once he learned of Dean's attendance. Their presence may have exacerbated residual tension that lingered within the organization due to the Isleños/Torneros, down-the-road/up-the-road distinction, which up until this point had not caused much trouble for LIS. It has been suggested by several Isleño informants that this difference in political persuasions, while certainly not the sole reason for the ensuing split within the organization, had some influence in helping to shape some general attitudes of members as the split occurred.

The Split

The 1995 election of officers within LIS remains a matter of much controversy. I have collected many accounts from both sides of the split, as well as from Isleños who claim a neutral stance to the events that took place surrounding these elections. After considering each account, perhaps the most balanced and generally agreed upon synopsis of what took place during these elections would read like the following composite sketch. The incumbent president, by most accounts a capable and good president, was up for reelection. Though of Canarian descent, she possessed her husband's non-Spanish surname, and was considered an up-the-road Isleño by many from down-the-road. Running against her was a woman from down-the-road. The

incumbent had more formal education than her opponent, yet many Isleños perhaps viewed the challenger as more in touch with traditional Isleño culture. Because of the incumbent's general popularity and good record, her opponent realized that she would need to enlist new members who were unfamiliar with the incumbent. The challenger, along with some of her supporters, began searching for Isleños who were not yet members of LIS in order shore up additional support.

The incumbent and her supporters began to realize what was taking place, and decided to utilize the same tactic. However, they did not limit themselves to just Isleños in their search for new recruits. At that time, the bylaws of LIS not only granted brand new members instant voter eligibility, but membership eligibility had also been widened since the organization's inception. It was no longer necessary to be of Spanish descent or from the lower parts of the parish to join. Several years prior to this election, in an effort to increase the exposure of LIS, boost the membership rolls, and qualify for more funding opportunities, the bylaws were changed to make membership open to anyone interested in promoting Isleño heritage. This allowed the incumbent to draw in recruits from all types of ethnic backgrounds, something that her down-the-road challenger never considered. Many down-the-road Isleños had been against the expansion of membership eligibility and voting rights, and enlisting non-Isleños to help determine the outcome of a seemingly exclusive Isleño matter would not have occurred to the challenger as something that any true Isleño would do. This ultimately cost her the election, as the incumbent drew recruits from a broader pool of people. One informant, who claims a neutral stance in the events surrounding this election, perhaps described it best by saying: "each party wanted to stack the house and the party that stacked the house the biggest won."

The precise sequence of events that lead to the formation of a second Canarian heritage

organization in St. Bernard has been somewhat clouded by the passing of its founder, Irvan Perez. Perez had also been up for re-election for his officer position with LIS, but won. According to other informants who sided with Irvan in his decision to split with the organization, he thought that the tactics used by the incumbent president were not done with the best intentions of the Isleños in mind. Even before the election, a small degree of tension existed within LIS between supporters of different local political factions. After the election, accusations of cheating and personal attacks from individuals on both sides of the conflict exacerbated the tension. To some members, these attacks made the thought of working together in the future seem unbearable and even impossible. As a result, Irvan and several other key down-the-road members of the organization forfeited their memberships and founded the Canary Islands Descendants Association (CIDA).

By the beginning of 1996, CIDA began holding regular monthly meetings. Members quickly wrote a constitution and by-laws that reflected a more conservative approach for determining membership and voting privileges. The bylaws outline four classes of membership, including: Voting Members, Associate Members, Honorary Members, and Junior Members. Voting Members are defined as “the descendants of the original Canary Island Families who settled in St. Bernard and surrounding parishes. These members have full voting rights and are allowed to hold office.” Associate Members are “non-descendent spouses of members and other interested parties. They are not allowed to vote or hold office.” Even Irvan Perez’s wife Louise, who was Italian and therefore classified as an Associate Member, was never eligible to vote in her lifetime, though she was an active member in CIDA, as she had been in LIS before the split. This is perhaps the biggest contrast between the bylaws of the two organizations.

The bylaws of LIS were amended shortly before the 1995 election to expand voter

eligibility. One key difference is that in LIS, Associate Members are also granted the right to vote, as well as to serve on the Board of Directors or to hold officer position other than President or Vice-President. Honorary and Junior Members in both CIDA and LIS are also not allowed to vote or hold office. Additionally, after the controversial election in 1995, LIS once again amended their bylaws to state that only after being a member for the period of one year could members of any class gain voting privileges. This was done in an effort to prevent the same questionable tactics used by both sides in the election from ever happening again.

The differences of these bylaws reflect the two organizations' respective attitudes about Isleños identity at the time of the split. Though they both possessed members from all over St. Bernard, and even from New Orleans, CIDA members thought of their club as having a more down-the-road character than LIS, which they in turn thought of as an up-the-road club. Down-the-road Isleños tended to be more exclusive in the way that they judged Isleño identity. Even if one could trace their ancestry back to the original Canarian settlers, one had to have connections to the down-the-road Isleños territory and the lifestyle it commanded in order to be considered a true Isleño. On the other hand, LIS was more inclusive in their ideas about Isleño identity, which is reflected in the many promotional materials that they have produced over the years. In most accounts of Isleños history produced by LIS, such as in the article "Los Isleños Heritage: Alive in St. Bernard," which reoccurs in LIS' annual *Official Fiesta Guide*, there is always emphasis on the fact that some Isleños remained farmers and interacted more with other ethnic groups in the region, while others moved down-the-road and worked the marsh in relative isolation. According to LIS, both groups are equal and deserving of the Isleños identity.

For a period of about thirteen years from 1996 to 2008, LIS and CIDA operated completely separately from one another, with virtually no interaction between the organizations.

There were some Isleños who were members of both organizations, but these people generally tended to be much more active in one than the other. Others, disheartened by the split, decided not to participate at all. For example, one informant told me, “I was called and asked if I wanted to start the new club, to be a member, and I turned them down. So I dropped out of both of them. I got out, because I didn’t want to have nothing to do with all that political stuff.” Many other informants claimed a neutral stance in the split. Another informant suggested that there was considerable fallout from the split, indicating that it effectively split up friends and families in some cases. Her participation also dwindled after the split.

Much like LIS, CIDA was the recipient of a donated house that they would use as a museum. The house once belonged to Juan Lopez, a Spaniard who settled at Delacroix in the early twentieth century. Lopez was a fisherman who married an Isleña, thereby cementing his rightful place as an Isleño. The house, dating back to at least the 1920s, was donated to CIDA by Lopez’s grandchildren. The contrast between the houses that became the LIS and CIDA museums is noteworthy in that it further reinforces some of the up-the-road/down-the-road generalizations connected to these two organizations. An Isleño who lived a traditional down-the-road lifestyle as a fisherman once owned the CIDA museum. The LIS museum was once owned by Manuel Molero who, as described earlier, was for various reasons not trusted or well liked by some down-the-road people, justifiably so or not. Reflecting the political division between the two groups, CIDA chose to relocate the house to land owned by Lynn Dean, in an arrangement that allowed them use of the land as long as they held two events there per year. Dean was fresh out of his successful run for State Senator, and tension between his supporters and the supporters of his opponent had perhaps somewhat exacerbated the preexisting tension between up-the-road and down-the-road Isleños.

Shortly after forming, CIDA members began to organize events that were similar to those held by LIS. Trips to the Canary Islands, festivals, and traditional Canarian dance demonstrations by the organization's dance troupe all took place. Educational field trips for St. Bernard Parish school children were hosted by the organization at the museum. The museum held a "Genealogy Room" where people could investigate their Canarian ancestry. CIDA maintained contacts within the Canary Islands and Spain, and even had an audience with the Spanish King and Queen. These types of heritage promotion efforts were essentially parallel to those of LIS, yet for thirteen years the officers of the two groups never held a formal meeting to discuss cooperation in their heritage promotion efforts. As long as both groups could function successfully apart from one another, there was no reason for either group to make concessions to the other, or to evaluate the ways in which they characterize and create the Isleño identity.

Hurricane Katrina and Recovery

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina caused enormous damage to St. Bernard Parish. LIS and CIDA were not spared from this destruction. Virtually every structure in lower St. Bernard Parish was underwater for days, including both museums. The LIS museum was also crushed by a fallen 90 ft. Water Oak, exposing contents that were even above the flood line to the elements. Efforts were made by each club to salvage what they could from the wrecked buildings. Of course, people had the destruction of their own homes to contend with as well, and activities were postponed for both organizations for an extended period of time. LIS began applying for FEMA money to help them in the rebuilding. CIDA, however, initially decided that they would disband.

Just prior to Katrina, a key founding member of CIDA had a falling out with Lynn Dean

who, though not an active member of the club, had a significant amount of power over how the museum was presented, because it was on his land. After this member's departure, club activity declined, as she was a particularly motivated and gifted organizer. Events still took place, but there were fewer of them and they were not as well attended as they once were. Additionally, CIDA membership continued to age as few new members joined. To many it seemed as though an inevitable end was drawing close. Because of this general attitude before Katrina, after the storm, when much of what they had accomplished over the years had been destroyed, there seemed little point in carrying on. About two years after Katrina, CIDA officers organized membership meetings to discuss how the organization should disperse its income. As a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, upon dissolution they were required to either spend their assets on CIDA expenses or donate it to a charitable organization. Initially, members decided to use their assets to hold a festival. If it proved to be profitable, they would choose a cause to which to donate the funds. If they the lost money, no harm was done, as they were dissolving anyway.

However, as members began to once again meet regularly, several factors made them change their minds about dissolving. Lynn Dean, for health reasons, was no longer able to involve himself in the club's affairs. This, in turn, led to the return of the founding member whom had quit after a dispute with Dean. Her renewed involvement gave other members a jolt of enthusiasm in regards to the organization. Also, the president of CIDA at the time of Katrina had begun the process of applying for state grants to fund the construction of a new multipurpose building. The club would be able to rent the building out for receptions or festivals. The inside of the building would also contain showcases of the organization's crafts and displays depicting the Canarian history of St. Bernard Parish, thus promoting the heritage to anyone who attended an event at the building. Finally, the new St. Bernard Parish President, Craig Taffaro,

approached the organization to inquire about the possibility of CIDA and LIS cooperating with one another in order to more cohesively promote the Canarian heritage in St. Bernard.

Though initially many CIDA members were unsure of what to think about such cooperation, and some were dead set against it, they were encouraged by the fact that the parish government was showing interest in them for the first time. When Taffaro attended a CIDA general membership meeting in August of 2008, one of the former officers of the club thanked him for reaching out to the organization, as she felt they had been ignored from the start, despite having represented the parish nationally and internationally while Irvan Perez was alive. Regardless of what might end up happening in regards to Taffaro's request for cooperation between the groups, she was appreciative of CIDA finally getting the recognition she felt it deserved.

Since LIS had entered into a cooperative agreement with the parish government and the National Park Service, many CIDA members assumed that LIS was much more politically connected and powerful. While this certainly may be true in some ways, CIDA members perhaps overestimated the amount of political benefits LIS receives. For instance, until recently it was a commonly held belief by many in CIDA that, because LIS donated its land and property to the parish government, the government paid for many of the club's expenses, such as the moving of several historic homes to the LIS museum complex. In truth, the parish government's agreement with the National Park Service ended in 1996, after the Park failed to maintain the property. LIS paid for each of those houses to be moved with club funds, which are raised primarily through their annual festival, as well as several fund raisers held throughout the year. Regardless of the truth of the matter, many CIDA members long considered LIS to have strong financial support from parish government, while simultaneously feeling ignored by the parish.

LIS also began to slowly recover after Katrina. The museum had to be demolished, but through the use of FEMA funds, a new museum will be built in the same location. The outside of the house will be a replica of the original museum, while the inside will be a new design that is more suited to the needs of a museum space. Other buildings on the grounds are being elevated and repaired as well. The organization held its first festival after Katrina in March of 2006. Despite the rebuilding process, the organization returned to as many of its regular activities as possible.

However, there is one effect of Hurricane Katrina from which members of both clubs have acknowledged they can never recover. The loss of many elderly club members has hit both organizations quite hard. Many elderly evacuated with their families, who decided to settle outside of St. Bernard Parish. There are also stories of some elderly simply passing away after losing all their earthly possessions, as well as, in many cases, loved ones. These members were essentially the organizations' greatest links to the past, and were also among the last of the Isleños who practiced Isleños crafts and traditions, such as duck carving and *décima* singing. One officer of CIDA estimated that about 75% of the people on the organization's list of crafters are now deceased. LIS is in a similar situation, as they lost many of their crafters to CIDA after the mid 1990s split, and Katrina has only made matters worse. Aside from the crafting and traditional knowledge that is being lost with the passing of these members, many of these Isleños represented a distinctly Isleños character that has become rarer in younger generations. These are some of the last Isleños who lived what is considered by many to be the characteristic Isleños lifestyle. Both LIS and CIDA members are increasingly desperate to record the memories, stories, and traditional knowledge of elderly Isleños, as each passing member of the community is viewed as a great loss to the heritage.

Another issue exacerbated the loss of the oldest generation. Young people were not joining either organization. As older members were passing, there were no younger members to replenish the clubs' numbers. Both LIS and CIDA recognized this as a major problem that could eventually spell the end for their organizations. To some extent, it was perhaps this concern that made both clubs seriously consider Taffaro's request to cooperate with one another. Craig Taffaro became St. Bernard Parish President in early 2008. Several months after taking office, he contacted the presidents of LIS and CIDA to set up a meeting to discuss the reasons for the initial split and the promotion of the Canarian heritage in St. Bernard.

Merger Talks

Craig Taffaro and several past and current officers of LIS and CIDA met at a local diner in June 2008. Despite the informal setting, this marked the first formal meeting between the two organizations in thirteen years. Taffaro told the representatives of the organizations a bit more about why he wanted to speak to them. He confessed that he only learned of the Isleños as an adult. Taffaro is not of Canarian descent, and there was no Isleños curriculum in Louisiana History textbooks when he was a child. Since becoming parish president, he had come to recognize the Isleños as a real jewel, and that if effectively promoted, the Isleños heritage could play a significant role in making St. Bernard Parish even better than it was before Hurricane Katrina. Now more than ever was it important to preserve the Isleños heritage, as St. Bernard had lost a lot of residents, and entirely new populations were starting to change the face of the parish. Clearly, the parish president was also concerned with trying to turn the Isleños into a boon to parish tourism, as well as making them a clear part of the parish brand. Taffaro asked why the organizations split up, and if that would be a barrier to future cooperation, if not some

form of merger. After recounting the details of the split, the organizations left with agreements to continue discussing the matter soon, and Taffaro agreed to attend each of their following meetings to speak to their members about his request. Before leaving, CIDA officers expressed a concern about the lax nature of the LIS bylaws at the time of the split, which allowed anyone to join and immediately vote in club elections. LIS officers assured them that the bylaws had been amended in order to prevent the 1995 election tactics from ever being used again.

Taffaro fulfilled his promise to speak to the general memberships of both organizations. He gave them each roughly the same speech, reiterating the same ideas he had expressed to the clubs' officers. He told each group that as a college student in Lafayette, he witnessed first hand what an effectively promoted heritage could accomplish. He watched the Cajun cultural explosion happen before his eyes, and he believes there is no reason why the Isleños could not accomplish a similar feat. This story was perhaps especially appealing to the LIS parish president, who has often remarked that one of her primary goals in LIS is to make the Isleños as well known and as much a household name as the Cajuns. She and another prominent LIS member have traveled to various parts of the country to perform a short historical skit in which they play two of the original Canarian settlers to Louisiana. Most recently, they performed for a week at the Epcot Center during a celebration of Louisiana culture. Ironically, they were booked to perform on a stage called the Acadian Cottage. She also often speaks of the LIS effort to get Isleños curriculum into Louisiana History textbooks, at which they have succeeded, though CIDA members are quick to point out that many of the pictures of Isleños in these textbooks are actually of CIDA members.

Taffaro was also careful to stress that he recognizes that there were historical complications between the groups, and that he was not trying to suggest that those grievances

were not legitimate, but he urged the groups to find consensus despite their up-the-road/down-the-road differences. He emphasized that this was ultimately their decision, and that parish government would help in any way that it could if it meant a more unified Canarian presence in the parish. This left the members of both organizations with much to think about, and led to a series of meetings and correspondences between the groups as they reached consensus about how the clubs would unite.

For the most part, members from both clubs saw the benefits of reunification. With so many crafters passing away, consolidating the talents of those who were left seemed like a good way to more effectively preserve their work, as well as potentially pass the skills on to younger generations. In a more general sense, so many people had not returned to St. Bernard Parish after Katrina that active memberships in both clubs were down. One larger organization seemed like it could be more effective than two shrinking ones. Both groups also recognized that each had its own strengths. CIDA possessed more crafters and bearers of cultural traditions, while LIS had a cooperative agreement with the parish and more members familiar with the protocol of applying for grants and other funding for club events and activities. Additionally, many people liked the idea of the two groups coming back together because, as one LIS member put it, “we’re all family. We’re all related one way or another.”

However, there were a few members of each club who either did not view a merger as particularly useful, or were absolutely against one. One LIS member once told me that he was not worried about the success of the merger. He claimed about two-thirds of CIDA’s members were also members of LIS, and that if there were hold outs to the merger on the CIDA side, then it must be from the same uninformed Isleños who think that Manuel Molero was a crook. Another LIS member did not understand why most of the others believed one club would be

more effective than two. “Don’t we have more than one parish in St. Bernard,” she asked. “The church I go to holds their own events, and the other churches do their things, but it’s all under one Catholic Church. Couldn’t this be the same sort of thing?” Though such voices existed, they were in the minority.

On the CIDA side, support for a merger was strongly supported by a few members, outright rejected by a few, and tentatively supported by the majority, as they weighed out all of the pros and cons. There was also a good deal of suspicion by some members towards the motives of both LIS and the parish government. Members began to ask questions such as, “why are they interested in us all of a sudden? Do they need us, or would we just be a feather in their cap?” Over the course of several months, CIDA members attempted to work out the answers to these questions. The first meeting of all of the officers of both clubs took place in September 2008 in the boardroom of Delacroix Corporation in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The LIS president was also president of the corporation for many years, and is a descendent of Manuel Molero. She began the meeting by outlining the main sticking points for LIS. The first was that the organization would continue to be called Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society. The second was that the club would continue to allow non-Isleños Associate Members to vote.

A former CIDA president spoke up to admit that due to the emotional circumstances surrounding the split, he may have overcompensated for the laxity of the LIS voting privileges when they wrote the CIDA bylaws. He suggested that voting rights for Associate Members was probably something they should have allowed in their own organization by now. However, he did think that the name of the organization should change to reflect that a new organization was merging with an old one. Many CIDA members felt strongly about this point, as they did not want to simply be a small group being subsumed by a larger one and completely forgotten. The

former CIDA president also felt some clarification should be added to the name to explain from where the Isleños originated. He suggested that “Canary Island Descendents” be added parenthetically to the name of the organization: Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society (Canary Island Descendents). While LIS members were against changing the official registered name of the organization, as it would require legal paperwork and possibly cause confusion among some of their contacts in the Canary Islands, they did not rule out compromise in the future.

Though nothing was settled at this first meeting, two other issues emerged as being especially important to CIDA members. The first was their voter eligibility status if they were to join the older organization. LIS had changed their bylaws to state that one had to be a member for one year to be eligible to vote, but CIDA members wanted an exception granted for any CIDA member who chose to take part in the reunification. The second issue was the fate of the CIDA officers. CIDA wanted its officers to serve in an advisory capacity until the next LIS election, in order to make sure the concerns of CIDA transplants were being considered. They also thought that this would facilitate the transition period. Over the course of the next few months, several meetings were held between the groups, and several letters were sent between them. CIDA members felt that they were making little progress, as LIS would simply not agree to change the name of the organization, nor could they get concrete answers to their other concerns. In a letter dated February 26, 2009, CIDA addressed these three main concerns, and presented this letter to LIS at a meeting on March 3, 2009. The CIDA members had agreed before the meeting that if they were to not make any additional progress on these points, this would be the final meeting, and that they would continue on as a separate organization for as long as the club could sustain itself.

The Final Meeting

This final meeting took place in a boardroom in the St. Bernard Parish government complex. Present were the officers and boards of both organizations, as well as additional members who had been involved in some of the merger talks since the beginning. The meeting began with a CIDA member reading the letter, in which CIDA had devised a new potential solution for changing the name of the club. They suggested adding “de Canarios” to the existing name: Los Isleños de Canarios Heritage and Cultural Society. Adding a reference to the Canaries would clarify the origin of the Isleños and pay homage to CIDA. LIS reiterated that they thought changing the name was not a good idea, and that on a recent trip to the Canary Islands, various contacts in the government there has advise them against it. Various LIS members then spoke about the progress they had made in attempting to popularize the Isleños name. A CIDA member responded to these reports, “We understand that you’ve worked hard and are proud of your accomplishments. We’ve worked hard and are proud of ours too, so we don’t want to just be swallowed up by you all and forgotten.”

At this point, a former CIDA president who had been at the forefront of the negotiations spoke up. She was confused, because in some past conversations, LIS had seemingly agreed to at least include Canary Island Descendants in parenthesis after the society name on their stationary and signage. Was this now off the table? The LIS president said that all she could agree to presently was the signage. Growing tired of the name debate, the former CIDA president decided to move on to the other points, to see if any consensus could be met there. The current CIDA president was resistant to move on without a definitive answer on the name change, but the former president pushed ahead to the topic of voting rights. Would CIDA members be granted voting rights immediately? LIS argued that in the past, when CIDA

members came to join LIS, they had to wait a year to vote just like any other new member. A CIDA member took this opportunity to point out that this was not a normal situation, but a merger of two equal groups, which she thought warranted an exception to the rules. She also added that she did not believe that LIS was entering into these meetings in the true spirit of negotiation. Several LIS members objected to her statement.

The tension in the room was slowly building, as the current CIDA president had become silent after not receiving an answer about the name change. There was also one particular LIS member who, on a couple of occasions, suggested that the clubs should not merge. It was clear to the former CIDA president that there were some conflicting personalities in the room, as well as lingering hurt feelings dating back to 1995 and beyond. She took a moment to declare, “look, I know we’ve got differences in the room, but down-the-road or up-the-road people, we’re gonna have to let the animosity go.” The founding CIDA president chimed in to support the call for cooperation by saying, “this isn’t about any individuals, but it’s about the community, and keeping our heritage alive.” Another CIDA member explained that they do not want voting rights in order to perform some sort of take over, but that if they choose to dissolve their own club and join another, they simply want to feel a part of things. The former CIDA president added, “We were there at the election thirteen years ago, so I understand your apprehension in letting us vote immediately, but we are a viable organization bringing assets and a museum into your organization, and we just want a part and a say.” The LIS president acknowledged their concerns, but explained that LIS would not be making any final decisions at this meeting. They would have to hold a board meeting afterwards to discuss it.

The current CIDA president became extremely frustrated upon finding out that CIDA would not have any answers by the end of the meeting, so he took the opportunity to express that

there were no hard feelings, but he had to leave. He and three others who had accompanied him walked out of the meeting. Six other CIDA members stayed behind to continue the talks. The current president's departure was a reflection of the underlying tension and residual animosity between the two groups. This led one CIDA member to say, "in order for this merger to work, the split has to be water under the bridge. But is there too much animosity for us to even pretend like we could reunite?" From both sides of the table, her question was answered with a resounding "No!"

The discussion continued with LIS starting to make some concessions. The LIS secretary suggested that, in addition to putting Canary Island Descendants on signage at the museum complex, it could probably also be added to the club stationary as part of the footer. Also, LIS just held elections, so if the CIDA members were to join right away, they would have been members for about a year anyway before any elections took place, meaning their voting eligibility should not be a problem. As far as having CIDA officers serve in an advisory capacity, this could definitely be achieved in some fashion. Pleased that LIS was beginning to address their concerns, CIDA members decided to adjourn the meeting so that the LIS members could vote on the issues they had discussed. Before leaving, the former CIDA president requested that they expedite the decision making process, because she was going to have to go back to her club, including the members who had walked out of the meeting, and be a "spectacular salesman."

The next day she received a phone call from the LIS president saying that the board and officers voted to approve of the suggested concessions. The former CIDA president held a meeting at her home with the other CIDA officers, and convinced them that the merger was what was best for the parish and for the Isleños heritage. As of this writing, LIS and CIDA members are making final preparations to merge.

CONCLUSION

The Isleño/Tornero, down-the-road/up-the-road distinction, though in decline in recent years, still featured in the talks about the merger of CIDA and LIS. Residual traces of this distinction were explicitly acknowledged by Craig Taffaro at his meeting with the CIDA general memberships, as well as by the former president of CIDA, who mentioned it at the final meeting between the groups. On both occasions, the evoking of the distinction was part of a call for reconciliation between the two groups. In order to achieve reconciliation, CIDA members especially had to rethink how they conceive of their heritage. For thirteen years they had operated an organization with a distinctly down-the-road character. In many of their eyes, down-the-road Isleños were the truest Isleños. The only reason why they even entertained the possibility of uniting with the LIS was because they recognized that their organization and heritage was in danger of being forgotten.

Despite critics who rue the flexibility of heritage (Lowenthal 1996), if it were not for heritage's flexible nature, CIDA members would probably have never come to the table. Due to the economic, social, and political pressures the traditional down-the-road Isleños way of life virtually no longer exists, and only a handful of Isleños even reside down-the-road. For thirteen years, CIDA members attempted to deal with the loss of this culture by operating a relatively exclusive organization that emphasized the down-the-road Isleños lifestyle, and for much of that time it worked. CIDA helped members to adjust to the rapid pace of change and to hold on tightly to a way of life that was slipping away. It also allowed them to teach the community about this way of life, in hopes that at least the memory of it would live on. However, the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, both to material possessions and to the membership base, reduced the club's capacity to teach others about the heritage. They realized it would take years

for CIDA to recover to their previous capacity, and with an aging membership, they feared they may never reach that point.

In order to address these concerns, CIDA members gradually let go of the more rigid conception of who can rightfully be called an Isleño. This was a necessity in order to even consider working with LIS. In effect, they expanded the meaning of Isleño identity to suit their current needs. They recognized that merging with LIS would provide them with increased opportunities to keep the memory of their ancestors alive. It would also impact them in a more practical sense. As one CIDA member explained, with the membership growing older, and the same small group of people rotating in and out of officer positions, she was tired of being responsible for so much. She was ready for the organizations to merge, in order to help spread out the work, so that she could enjoy herself again. She said, “I’m ready to work and have some nice events, but I’m sick of working myself to death, and none of us should have to do that. This should be fun.”

I once heard a member of LIS say about the merger discussions, “we’re acting like some of this stuff is a big deal, but if the merger happens, in ten years or so, nobody will even remember there was a problem.” There may be some truth in his words. Heritage is not history and, in its selective nature, has the ability to overlook past political or personal conflicts in order to better serve the present (Olwig 1999). The Isleños maintained two separate heritage organizations because they had the luxury of doing so. Once their ability to entertain that luxury diminished, they began to consider other ways to continue promoting their heritage. What resulted was an additional slow and gradual blurring of the already fading distinction between Isleños/Torneros, down-the-road/up-the-road. This illustrates how the flexible nature of heritage can help people under incredible global, political, economic, environmental, and demographic

pressures devise new solutions to seemingly dire problems. No one knows what the state of the Isleños will be a decade from now. The possible variations are too numerous to bother a guess. What seems assured is that the Isleños identity will continue to be negotiated, debated, and contextually driven as these persistent and organized individuals attempt to preserve that which they find most important. As one Isleño once explained to me, “It’s my memories, I don’t want to see it forgotten.”

NOTES

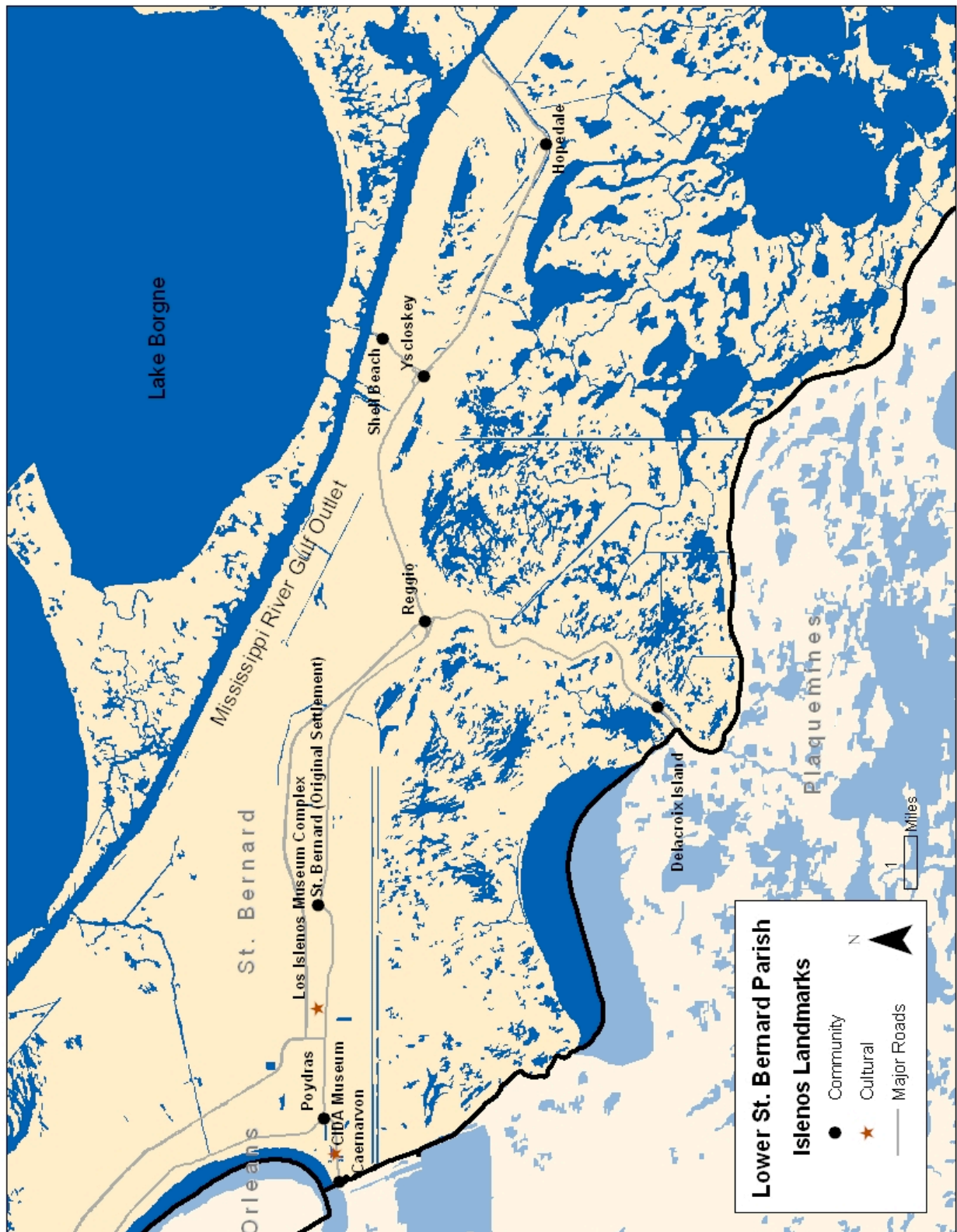
1. Names of Isleño informants have purposefully been excluded from the text in order to ensure their privacy. In cases where names are used, they have been altered.
2. Though the original name of Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society was Los Isleños Heritage Corporation, only the later name is used in this paper, for the sake of clarity.

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Appendix 2: Map of Lower St. Bernard Parish



VITA

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