

Interview of: Dot Domilise
Interviewer: Sarah Roahen
Interview Date: July 28, 2006

August 17, 2006

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Interviewee: Dot Domilise
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[Begin Dot Domilise Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's July 28th 2006 and I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana at Domilise's po-boy shop. Did I say that correctly?

00:00:15

Dot Domilise: You sure did.

00:00:15

SR: So could you tell me your name and--yeah your name?

00:00:20

DD: My name is Dorothy Domilise.

00:00:25

SR: I didn't realize that was your full name. And if you don't--if you're comfortable with it your--can you tell me your date of birth?

00:00:32

DD: Eight-sixteen-twenty-two.

00:00:37

SR: And for the record, how do you make your living?

00:00:40

DD: Making sandwiches. [*Laughs*]

00:00:46

SR: Okay, well let's start with--why don't you tell me where you were born and where you grew up.

00:00:53

DD: I was born on Aragon Plantation in Thibodaux, Louisiana. And later in life moved to Franklin, Louisiana where I lived a greater part of

my life--'til I got married. And my husband came back from New Guinea; that's when I lived here totally.

00:01:14

SR: Your husband was in New Guinea?

00:01:16

DD: Two years--in the Philippine Islands.

00:01:19

SR: Yeah, what was he doing there?

00:01:21

DD: He was in the service--World War II.

00:01:26

SR: And did you meet him before he went into the service?

00:01:29

DD: Uh-hm.

00:01:30

SR: What was the name of the Plantation you were born on?

00:01:33

DD: Aragon--I don't know how to spell it but it's still--some part of it is still in Thibodaux. In fact a man brought me a picture of a big house that's on the plantation right now. I guess they must have--in those days it must have been the big main house or maybe--I don't know what they did with it, but he brought me a picture.

00:01:59

SR: And why were you born there; was that your family house?

00:02:03

DD: It--my family was from that area of Louisiana.

00:02:08

SR: And for the record, how far is that from New Orleans?

00:02:11

DD: Hmm; maybe about 75 miles--something like that--maybe not that long at all. Not very far.

00:02:21

SR: Not very far, huh? And--and what was your family life like? Did you have siblings?

00:02:29

DD: Uh-hm; plenty--

00:02:33

SR: How many?

00:02:35

DD: Well I have now left living four sisters; I had four brothers that passed away in their 30s. They don't know why--such a coincidence and then my last sister was a twin but one twin died at three. And then my mother had some--some that passed away at birth, so we were a big family.

00:03:10

SR: A really big family. Did you grow up Catholic?

00:03:14

DD: Uh-hm.

00:03:15

SR: And so that was a lot of mouths to feed.

00:03:19

DD: Yes; it sure was--with a woodstove and no gas or anything like that.

00:03:31

SR: Wow.

00:03:33

DD: And the refrigerator that—well, they didn't call them refrigerators; they called them ice-boxes, where the ice-man delivered a block of ice to you every day or every other day or something like that to keep it--keep the food cold.

00:03:53

SR: Wow; and who did--who did the cooking in your family?

00:03:55

DD: My mother.

00:03:58

SR: With all those kids?

00:03:59

DD: I don't know how she did it and washed on a washboard because there was no such thing as a washing machine.

00:04:09

SR: So she would boil water on the woodstove?

00:04:13

DD: Uh-hm.

00:04:13

SR: Wow; and was she a good cook?

00:04:17

DD: Oh a very good cook--very, very good cook and for--the water came from what they called a cistern--big round tall covered--where the

rain would get into it and that would be the water to wash your clothes,
bathe, drink--.

00:04:44

SR: What did your father do for a living?

00:04:46

DD: My father was a mechanic.

00:04:49

SR: A mechanic, wow; so what--

00:04:53

DD: And an engineer.

00:04:55

SR: Oh an engineer?

00:04:57

DD: Uh-hm; and a mechanic on these plantations.

00:05:02

SR: Oh, so he worked on the plantation?

00:05:06

DD: Uh-hm; that's why I was living there because he was working there and in charge of machinery and everything else--whatever they asked--changed wheels and--.

00:05:23

SR: What are some of your--what's an early food memory that you have from home?

00:05:28

DD: Potato soup and rice. [*Laughs*] And baked macaroni and chicken stew--killed your own chickens and made the stew. Baked the macaroni or rice and vegetables that grew in the garden--

00:05:59

SR: So a lot of like one-pot meals?

00:06:02

DD: Uh-hm.

00:06:04

SR: The stew--

00:06:05

DD: Well that wasn't all--.

00:06:08

SR: Right; I just meant stews?

00:06:11

DD: Yeah, yeah; oh yeah; uh-hm.

00:06:17

SR: And did you learn to cook from your mother?

00:06:20

DD: Partly--yeah; uh-hm.

00:06:23

SR: Where were you in the line of siblings?

00:06:27

DD: I was the eldest—[*Laughs*] except the one born before me died, a boy born before me.

00:06:41

SR: So you probably had to help out a lot.

00:06:43

DD: Before I was even born I think he passed away. I'm not sure about that.

00:06:53

SR: So did you have to help out in the kitchen?

00:06:57

DD: Not that great because a part of our lives we like lived with my grandfather--the whole big family lived together like my grandmother and then my aunts--my dad's sisters and my dad's brothers--we all lived together. And then--well his brother had two children and--and we just managed that way.

00:07:30

SR: Lots of hands to help out? So tell me how you met your husband.

00:07:37

DD: Well I had an uncle and aunt who lived on the next block.

00:07:41

SR: Here uptown?

00:07:43

DD: Uh-hm; and--and during the summer months I would come stay with the children while they worked and because the children would not be in school and they would be home, you know. And my husband lived here and--and in the middle of that block over here there's a place they called the Buzzards Hall, you know the marching club? Well that--that was their place--before my time around here even. And--and they had bingo games there twice a week and my husband worked over there when they had the games and he would pass in front of my uncle's house and that's how I would first meet him.

00:08:35

SR: So your aunt and uncle lived on Annunciation?

00:08:39

DD: Mmm-hm.

00:08:40

SR: And how old were you then?

00:08:42

DD: I was like in high school or like 15 'cause I graduated when I was
16--in the country--not here.

00:08:59

SR: And did--what was your husband's name?

00:09:01

DD: His name was Samuel but they called him Sam.

00:09:06

SR: And so did--did his family own this restaurant at that time?

00:09:11

DD: Uh-hm; but the children you know like--well I'll call myself a child; they had one phone here so they put it on this wall.

00:09:22

SR: It was on that wall?

00:09:23

DD: And people would get their phone calls here and--and whoever got a phone call, whenever they would answer it they would go call the person to the telephone, but other than that no children weren't allowed to even walk in here to get a drink or anything like that.

00:09:41

SR: Is that because it was more of a bar?

00:09:45

DD: I would say maybe; I don't know. I would guess that would be the reason.

00:09:53

SR: Was it a sandwich shop then also?

00:09:54

DD: They sold sandwiches but not--you know for people hanging around and things like that. And then it was not too many people buying sandwiches in those days.

00:10:07

SR: Oh so it wasn't—po-boys weren't a big deal then?

00:10:10

DD: Not then, no--not--not until the riverfront really--really opened up.

00:10:19

SR: What--what do you mean the riverfront opened up?

00:10:22

DD: Well people were employed along the riverfront and more wharfs were being built. That's the way I understand it; I don't know I wasn't here. I just stayed there with the kids for you know--'til school started and then back home. And then I worked in Franklin where I was living at--at the time.

00:10:53

SR: Oh what did you do in Franklin?

00:10:54

DD: I worked as a secretary to a man in--at a lumber company there.

They--they had a big lumberyard that imported wood and lumber from England and different places like that.

00:11:17

SR: And at that point were you dating your future husband or--?

00:11:22

DD: Yeah, I was still dating him whenever I came out here you know.

00:11:27

SR: Right, and when did you get married?

00:11:31

DD: I got married in--I think it was 1943--'43 I believe. I'm not sure but I think that's the year.

00:11:47

SR: Did you move to New Orleans right away then?

00:11:48

DD: No, because my husband was still in the service.

00:11:52

SR: Oh.

00:11:53

DD: I did come to New Orleans and stay with my grandmother for a while then but then I went back home and then I came back and stayed with her and I worked out here for--at the time it was Gallagher Storage Company.

00:12:10

SR: Gallagher Storage, yeah.

00:12:11

DD: I don't know if they still are in operation but they were a big company. They did a lot of import work and export and moving--at that time military families all over.

00:12:29

SR: At that time what?

00:12:30

DD: Moving military families all over.

00:12:34

SR: Oh 'cause that was World War II time.

00:12:38

DD: Yeah.

00:12:39

SR: So at what point did you get involved with the po-boy shop?

00:12:44

DD: I don't know. A long--it was after I had my first child when I did.

00:13:01

SR: And how many children did y'all have?

00:13:04

DD: Two.

00:13:04

SR: Two huh; and how did that--how did it happen that you started working here?

00:13:13

DD: Well my in-laws had it--

00:13:16

SR: Yeah; it was your in-laws' shop.

00:13:17

DD: And that's how I got involved because they were both not well people you know and my mother-in-law had diabetes very, very bad--very bad.

00:13:27

SR: Diabetes.

00:13:28

DD: And I had--I was taking care of her--living here, and she had--she had to have insulin like three times a day, you know. You had--in those days--that's when they first learned how to treat diabetes and you had to check their urine and blood three times before each meal, so it was three times a day that it was checked. And then--then my husband had a brother who was an invalid. He couldn't do anything and I took care of him too.

00:14:04

SR: You took care of your brother-in-law? So and that was in--for the record, the--Miss Dot lives in a house that's attached to the shop. And is that where you have always lived when you lived in New Orleans?

00:14:21

DD: After my husband came out of the service.

00:14:24

SR: Right.

00:14:25

DD: But not before; I didn't want to come here.

00:14:28

SR: You didn't want to come to New Orleans? [*Laughs*]

00:14:31

DD: No; I had relatives here and--but I didn't want to live here is what I meant. I wanted to live someplace else but he wanted to live with his family and so that's how we stayed here. But I can understand now with his brother and his mother being like they were.

00:14:54

SR: Yeah; well it seemed--it's hard for me to--it's hard for me to imagine Domilise's without you here. [*Laughs*]

00:15:05

DD: [*Laughs*] Well I didn't come out here 'til after I had my first child. That's when I came. Before then I was working you know--away--not in here. My mother-in-law and father-in-law did all that, and there was a lady that was a real good friend of theirs that did most of everything for them. That's how close they--they--they weren't relatives but real good friends.

00:15:37

SR: The employees?

00:15:38

DD: Yeah, and they just really took care of the place. My husband was not interested in this at all.

00:15:45

SR: He wasn't? What did he do for a living--your husband?

00:15:50

DD: Well when he first--before he went into the service he was in the Department of Agriculture and when he came out he went back in it for a while and then he got involved in politics--Mardi Gras and that was his life--not this.

00:16:08

SR: So this has always been your domain and did you take to it right away? Did you like it?

00:16:17

DD: I really--I don't know; to me it was just you know another day and something you had to do--you did it. I got used to it.

00:16:33

SR: And so last summer when you were named a *Guardian of the Tradition*. You know, that happened because you're considered a really important part of the community. At what point did you realize that--that what you were doing was important to people?

00:16:55

DD: Well I really--I really never looked at it that way. You know I just looked at it as working to make a living and something like that you know.

00:17:16

SR: At one time when I talked to you--this is a couple years ago--you--I was telling you that I liked the pepper wiener po-boy, which sadly is extinct. And you told me that when you were younger, I think it was in the early days of your marriage or your courtship you ate one--that was your favorite.

00:17:41

DD: It was my favorite; it was--I ate pepper wiener(s) every day--not a big one--on a piece of French bread. But what happened was Schott Meat Company in New Orleans--

00:17:58

SR: Schott?

00:18:00

DD: Schott Meat Company and they were handling the pepper wiener and that's who we were dealing with--almost all of our meat products

and they were getting them from a firm that was in Dubuque, Iowa, so and when they--Schott closed the firm in Dubuque still was sending me the pepper wiener(s) through a company that I was dealing with you know--not directly to me but they were being sold all over the city you know through different companies again even though Schott wasn't here. And I was dealing with the meat company that was across the river and they brought them in because we used them. And but then the company in Dubuque that was making them went out of business--sold the business to another company, a larger company and that company said that it would not be feasible for them to make the pepper wiener and 'til this day I can't understand it. I just cannot understand how they could say that when--I mean you know so much of it was being sent to New Orleans to different wholesale companies that were bringing it to their--selling it to their customers.

00:19:25

SR: Can you describe what a pepper wiener was?

00:19:28

DD: It was shaped you know more--a little longer and more round-- fuller than a regular wiener. The meat taste was not like a wiener taste at all and whatever little spice they used in it I have no idea, yeah; and it was really, really good. I mean people just were so disappointed when they could not get them anymore. And last year, a lady from South Carolina or someplace came here; she was a customer who moved away and would come back every so often and she was addicted to the pepper wiener. She saw these--in this other state and she came in here with a package like this under her arm and she said, "guess what I have? I have pepper wieners." I said where did you get them from? So I used them and made sandwiches for the group and she looked at me after they began to eat and I was watching their expression to see how they would enjoy it and she looked at me and she went--. [*Gestures*]

00:20:44

SR: She shook her head?

00:20:47

DD: Yeah, and that company--I've even had people on the internet and all this kind of thing trying to get pepper wieners and--.

00:21:04

SR: One thing that seemed distinctive about the pepper wiener was the red casing.

00:21:09

DD: Yeah, it was a tough casing but we'd peel it off.

00:21:13

SR: It was kind of a plastic casing.

00:21:15

DD: No, no, no; it wasn't plastic. [*Emphasis Added*] It was just a little tough casing just like an ordinary casing on any sausage but it was a

little more tough than the others and you had to peel it. I don't think you could bite through it.

00:21:32

SR: I guess that preserved it or something.

00:21:33

DD: I guess it did. It had to do something to it because I tell you-- people were so—"no more pepper wieners?" And I mean even the customers would try internet--all kinds of places--never get them.

00:21:54

SR: So then your po-boy menu which I'm looking at right now--

00:22:03

DD: The pepper wiener rests in peace.

00:22:08

SR: Oh look at that; the pepper wiener rests in peace. That's sad. Was the menu--did the menu always look like that or did it change over the years?

00:22:19

DD: Oh it's been more or less the same except at one time we didn't sell meatballs. But--and--and one time we didn't sell turkey. And more or less the same except--and barbecue; at one time we didn't sell barbecue. So it was just--just a little ordinary menu.

00:22:47

SR: What's your most popular po-boy?

00:22:51

DD: I have to say it's between the shrimp, the oyster, and the roast beef. [Coughs] You'd have to pull a straw. [Laughs] I just--you make it what you want it.

00:23:13

SR: Seafood and beef huh? And when you--is--was it like that when you first started in the business?

00:23:24

DD: No; it really--roast beef was more popular then--than seafood. Seafood just--I just rung up all this--and now it's just even with the roast beef.

00:23:39

SR: So in the background we can hear seafood probably right now huh--frying?

00:23:43

DD: You do.

00:23:45

SR: And tell me about who works here right now with you; you said that you have a grandson here?

00:23:51

DD: He helps; he doesn't work here totally all the time. He's out of school right now. [*Coughs*] Excuse me; but he's been helping and his mom, my daughter-in-law who was married to my son that passed away, she's--she's with me and really she does a lot of the running the business for me. She handles most everything--for me you know.

00:24:18

SR: And what is her name?

00:24:21

DD: Her name is Patti.

00:24:22

SR: Patti. What's her last name?

00:24:25

DD: Domilise.

00:24:29

SR: Oh of course, and the man who--who works behind the bar?

00:24:36

DD: Oh Raymond?

00:24:36

SR: Yeah.

00:24:37

DD: Oh he's just a friend that lives on the next block and he worked on Tchoupitoulas Street at a toy place and they closed up and we needed someone to come in here and so he used to come in here every, every, every evening from work after he would go home--come in here and sit

here 'til they closed up. [*Coughs*] And after this toy place closed well then we needed someone so he--he was right here. And then he lived in the next block but now he lives on Nashville--not much further.

00:25:16

SR: And how long ago was that--that he started here?

00:25:18

DD: Raymond? Raymond excuse me; how many years have you been working here? This young lady wants to know.

00:25:27

Raymond: Almost 137 years. Thirty-seven years but it feels like--

00:25:36

SR: Thirty-seven; so you know--you know each other pretty well right now. What does--what does your day--how does your day start and when?

00:25:46

DD: My day starts like 6:30 I'm here and just getting everything prepared. [*Coughs*] Excuse me; you want something to drink?

00:26:04

SR: I'm fine.

00:26:05

DD: You're beautiful too.

00:26:09

SR: Thank you. Has the room changed over the years or has this pretty much stayed the same?

00:26:15

DD: It has; with one storm long ago we--I had--this was all plaster-- walls and the ceiling and everything and with the storm there was like

I'm going to say a covering that went from this door around to that door over there, like a little roof part thing, you know.

00:26:44

SR: Like an awning.

00:26:46

DD: Like an awning but it wasn't called an awning in those days and it wasn't--and it just--and it had big round iron [*Coughs*] things that came up into you know--attached them to the insides I suppose and outside. You know that's how they were connected. And the storm knocked the one that was on this side totally away--completely across the street and missed a person's car by this much. [*Gestures*] And so that naturally made the plaster fall and we had a ceiling fan in the middle--way out and it shook that up a little bit and all the plaster from the ceiling was falling also. So my husband said he wasn't getting this whole place plastered again. And that's when they decided to put this--whatever this is in here-

-paneling I guess on the walls and ceiling. But there's a ceiling above this that's pretty high. [*Laughs*]

00:28:01

SR: Oh did you have any Katrina damage?

00:28:04

DD: The only Katrina damage we had--we were very lucky; we didn't flood--was I had a cinderblock fence--the side of my house to my garage in the backyard and the--Katrina blew that down totally in one piece and then leaks in the roof--but naturally no electricity as far as our refrigeration being gone. So everything was spoiled and we had to get all new refrigeration and you couldn't get anything here so you had to order and wait for it to come in. We were closed; so we were fortunate. We were closed like two months and two weeks, so that was not bad at all. Of course my roof leaks but--but we managed.

00:28:58

SR: I saw you--I came back in October and I saw you poking around and getting ready--I think you were waiting for your refrigeration but you were ready.

00:29:10

DD: Yeah, yeah.

00:29:12

SR: Well I think--thank you for your time; I think I should wrap it up because you're getting a dinner crowd and it will be a little noisy for the tape.

00:29:20

DD: Would you like something?

00:29:24

SR: Well I might consider that. [*Laughs*]

00:29:26

DD: Well that's good.

00:29:27

SR: Thank you.

00:29:27

[End Dot Domilise Interview]