

## **The Charlot Sisters on Second Street** *as told to Bill Wiegand*

As of the 1970s – three sisters, Regina and Rita Charlot, and Clara Charlot-Elliott – lived on Second Street off Fleitas Avenue. As descendants of “Free People of Color,” they had owned the last beach front property, located at 511 East Beach. It had been the home of their father, Christophe Charlot, since the beginning of the 1900s. This house has since, been considerably renovated, but some of the original timbers remain.

Christophe owned a herd of cattle which were let free to roam the streets for pasturage, as had been the custom for years. This eventually caused the proliferation of white picket fences along Scenic Drive. Of particular interest, was one cow with long horns and the unusual knack to “open any gate in the Pass,” as exclaimed by Charles Martin, former hardware store owner. Some residents installed “drive-over trip-bars” at carriage gates to inhibit the astute cow’s passage. During hot summer months, as flies would bother the cows, they would all promenade into the Mississippi Sound to bathe in the waters, head deep, and stand in the shade of the private wharves and bath houses. At night, it was not unusual for carriages to swerve around a cow that bedded down on the roadway.

Christophe had his own private oyster reef in the Gulf in front of his home, as was the case of a number of home owners along the beach front all the way to Biloxi. Christophe also maintained a little building where he sold oysters and fresh fish to the local residents.

The Charlot sisters related that an earlier family member, their grandfather, was known as *L’Homme Jim*. He had owned three schooners which were named the *Morning Star*, *Uncle Joe*, and the *James Charlot*. He would carry oysters, charcoal, and firewood to New Orleans through Lake Pontchartrain to the New Basin Canal to reach the city. There, he would pick up barrels of provisions to bring back to the Pass. He was known as a kindly man who never hesitated to give a helping hand to his family and neighbors. He was prosperous enough to lend money to those in need. He was a descendant of the original Charles (Charlot) who was a freed slave and awarded all the land which is now the central business district of Pass Christian including the property that reached northward to the Bayou Portage marshes.

The sisters reported that there was always something to eat in their home. In the back yard of the house was a brick oven called a *feu* in which they baked bread. A long wooden paddle was used to place the dough on a rack.

Continuing in relating their story, Clara Charlot Elliott drew a floor plan of the old beach front house. It showed a front porch running the width of the house, with a dining room and master bedroom behind the front porch. Behind these rooms was a back porch which separated two more bedrooms, one for the boys, the other for the girls. Extending from the main house was a decked walkway to the kitchen, which in those days was set apart for fire prevention, as it was not unusual for kitchens to catch on fire. When it rained, the girls had to run to the dining room with the food preparations.

Their home was furnished with fine old furniture, which Regina described as “not red dark, but black dark, and shiny, shiny. A lady living on Royal Street in New Orleans bought some of our furniture – a tester bed, a marble-top table, and a mirror, big like a door.” They had the occasion to see the restored pieces upon visiting their relative who worked for the family.

In another case, they sold a bed-stand and an armoire for \$1000 to a Chicago couple who were staying at the Mexican Gulf Hotel. “When the hotel burned down, it was like all

Pass Christian had burned down.” (The hotel had employed quite a few Negroes in addition to contracts for services, food and supplies – in addition, the hotel guests spent quite a few dollars in the town.)

Regina also related that, “when mamma was dying, she called me to the bed and wanted to tell me something, but I was scared and wouldn’t go listen to her. I should have gone because she might have wanted to tell me where some money was hidden . . .” The sisters had heard family stories about some money having been taken out by ox-team to DeLisle and buried for safe keeping, but was never found. The sisters argued whether the treasure was buried near St. Stephen Church or at the white church.

The old Charlot beach house was built of cypress and yellow pine, its sills were pegged together and “cut” nails were used throughout. It was sold to Edgar Bohn, then a prominent Pass Christian merchant, who moved it across the street to the south side, renting it to Palmer Orr and his mother. As a result of hurricane damages in 1947, he moved it back to its north side location on Beach Avenue facing the Gulf. Because of stories of buried treasure, there were occasions when he would find evidence of someone digging in his yard.