

ST. VINCENT'S ISLAND NWR
APALACHICOLA, FL
RECORDED GROUP—HENRY LOOMIS AND FAMILY
ROBERT GAY, CARETAKER-MANAGER
By George Gentry

[This is a tour group at St. Vincent NWR. Sounds heard are the bus, or a boat and people disembarking upon arrival. Also heard are the sounds of moving water at the beach and shore birds. There are several children in the group. They can be heard asking questions.]

This is the Refuge Manager, Terry. This is Mr. Peacock and this is Rick Lemon. It's good to see you!

There is a wonderful breeze. I think this island is insect free!

[Group is walking, exploring an area where Indian artifacts can be found. There are also sounds that indicate rowing a boat.]

Looking, here's a piece of some kind of pottery. Donna has one with lines on it. It's pretty cool! I'll go get it. Happy Birthday!

Oh, thank you!

It's must have been nice having this on your birthday.

Sure, sure!

This one has lines on it, and this one is in a circle.

I wonder how old these things are.

You can do a lot with these things.

Like an arrowhead?

Sure.

Oh, this is neat!

We drove. I had to run all the way to the cabin, which is not the way you normally run the beach. We run it from Indian Pass, down. I had to go all the way down to the cabin get the thing and go all the way back up. I get almost to Indian Pass, which is like, Road

#2, and I look and there's this Sea Turtle climbing on the dune at eleven-thirty in the afternoon!

Oh, you didn't! Oh great! And you got to see it!

Yes, and my daughter is in the thing with me!

Come on in here to show the kids.

Are we looking at something?

This is some of the pottery that dates back 3,000 years until I don't know when they left here. [Unintelligible] left in 1968. It was a lot harder here then. They had a lot deeper carving in them.

Do you know what Indians left them?

No, I really don't.

They used to have a lot of Oyster shells. They used to use a lot of them and they'd make a lot of pottery. I learned that in school.

Who was that?

Tomaquin [sic] Indians.

When you first got the island, was there stuff that wasn't as broken apart?

We had a lot higher middins. The middins were a lot higher. [middins, may be dunes] In 1985 we had a storm come by. It went by and came back out of the northeast. That one knocked a lot of our high middins down.

How old did you say these were?

They date back to 3,000 years ago. That's a long time, huh?

All of the animals that you have here, were they for hunting and stuff?

Most of the stuff that I was associated with was white tails, pigs and sandbar deer. The elin and the zebra were put here, just to have. We had a lot of cows. They tried to run some cows through and that worked out pretty good.

What is a middin anyway? Tell us about that.

Well, the Indian middin, to the best of my knowledge is when the Indians would eat the oysters and pile the shells up. That's where you find all of the broken pieces pottery.

So it's kind of like a dump?

Really, it's kind of like a dump.

How tall did they used to be?

You could stand, oh, probably ten feet.

Were they only on the shore?

This north shore, along the Picalene area is the only area that I know we've got them. There's a few middins further up towards Cabisoc, but nothing this high.

[Tour progresses.]

Oh look, they've all got their bathing suits on!

They can go swimming directly, down at the pass.

[Now it's lunchtime. Sounds like people are making sandwiches]

So Gramps, how old are you today?

How young is he?

Okay, how young are you today?

[Singing happy birthday to older gentleman. All at party are laughing and talking, encouraging him.]

There should be a lot more candles on that! Make a wish and blow them out!

Blow Gramps, blow!

Who is going to cut it? Will you help me pass them out please?

Oh this is good. Who's going to get the ice cream?

[Discussion takes place about the island]

They logged the island in the 40's and the 60's so they ran those ridges to build those roads. Now it should be eroding on one side and accreting on the other, but that's not happening. It's eroding all the way around. Now, the last two storms we noticed... St. George island... that wasn't one island.

What is your place and date of birth? The tapes rolling so introduce yourself to the transcriber.

I'm Robert Gay.

Is there a middle initial?

No, I get in enough trouble just being Robert! I work with the USFWS. I was born in Shippley, Florida.

You care to tell us when?

It's been a long time ago. Like fifty-one years. My dad moved here in 1952 and went work with Mr. Henry and Lee Loomis in 1953. We lived on the island as kids. My dad had a heart attack in 1964. I filled in, in his place. He passed away in 1964.

How long have you been with FWS?

Going on thirty years.

When did you start?

I started part-time somewhere around 1973.

What is your job?

I do maintenance, law enforcement, etc.

You are?

I am Lisa Williams. I am Jacky's daughter-in-law. My maiden name is Olson. I was born in San Francisco, California. I was born a long time ago too, on September 15, 1958. I work at a nature preserve in Jacksonville called Tree Hill, in Arlington.

I am Jacqueline C. (Chalmers) Loomis. I was born in Hong Kong, China in 1930. Henry and I live in Jacksonville, FL. What else would you like to know.

Tell us about Henry.

My husband is Henry Loomis. No middle initial. Henry was born in Tuxedo Park, NY. Today is his 84th birthday! April 19, 1919.

Do you think it would be appropriate to tell what his medical condition is now so that people can understand when they are watching this?

Probably so. We discovered six or seven years ago that Henry has what now termed Symatic Dementia, which is the loss of the front, left, temporal brain cells. This hinders his ability to communicate and to speak. It is now defined as one of the five different types of Alzheimer's combined with Parkinson's and called Pick's Disease. I just found that out from the Mayo Clinic. Henry retired in 1978 from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting where he was the President.

Where are we today?

We are on St. Vincent Island with our families, celebrating Henry's birthday. And we're also bringing our families here to St. Vincent for the first time. This is St. Vincent Island off the coast of Apalachicola, FL. Today is April 19, 2003.

What is this house, this place we are in right now?

This is one of the main houses that Henry and Lee stayed in. There was another house off to the left where Henry and his family stayed and another to the right where Henry's brother, Lee and his family would come and stay.

Robert, this is now a National Wildlife Refuge. Tell us a little about that.

This is a NWR. The Nature Conservancy purchased it in 1968. Later the USFWS took it over and it's been a NWR ever since.

Henry is very much aware of where he is and what is happening around him. It's just the communication that is greatly limited.

I don't know where to really start with this except maybe from the beginning, from your perspective Robert; where did this all start, as far as you know?

Well, back in 1953 when my dad went to work for Mr. Loomis, like I said, me moved over here and lived here as a family. We had some great times with the families that lived here. John Odom was one of the workers that lived here. I think he went to work around 1950. He worked until 1968. There was a black cook here, George Butler. He would stay here and cook for the staff as well as the Loomis brothers when they would come

and all of the Loomis' guests. After I went to work with them, a lot of our job was fixing up duck blinds, maintaining the island and keeping it as natural as we could.

You said you had some great times. What made it so great here?

I realize now that it was greater than I did then! I took too much for granted. We had a big family. There was five girls and three boys in my family. We lived here and after my dad passed away and we moved to the mainland, you really realize, "hey, we had it made"! We were away from a lot of people. It was kind of quiet. We'd ride the beach in the afternoons and some at night. It was just a great place to raise a family.

Can you tell us how they came to possess this place?

Dad had another island, at Hilton Head. We lived there for a time. The War came and that was that.

Henry's father, Alfred Lee Loomis, and his brother-in-law Landon Thorn worked very closely in business endeavors. Landon enjoyed hunting, but not as much as Alfred. They bought Hilton Head and when Henry was in the military, unknown to him, Landon and Alfred sold Hilton Head. Hilton Head was just a place where they adored hunting. They would go down there for all of the holidays. When Hilton Head was sold, Lee and Henry were very upset. And they said they were going to go out and buy their own island. Henry and Lee came here and learned of St. Vincent Island and they in fact purchased the island in 1948 for one hundred and forty thousand dollars, I believe. They imported a lot of wildlife. At that time, I believe Robert's father was the Manager for Henry and Lee.

He was pretty much the caretaker on the island. Jay Schuller was the lawyer in town. He handled the legal stuff. But on the island, my dad was pretty much the caretaker, yeah.

Robert's father then was the caretaker and ran the island. Henry and Lee's family would come down at various times to go hunting. They'd bring their families down. This is where some Henry's children have wonderful tales about where they learned to drive a jeep for instance. They'd put Gordy behind the jeep. I guess he would get down and push the floorboard, but he could steer and push at the same time. He learned to drive all over the island. They did spend a great deal of time here.

When was it that they bought the island? And when was it that they bought Hilton Head?

They bought St. Vincent Island in 1948. They bought Hilton Head in about 1934 and sold it around 1945. I know Henry was still in the military. They sold it to a guy that wanted the timber.

I've talked to Lee on the phone of several different occasions about how St. Vincent's came about. I remember that Lee told pretty much the same story. They were pretty much very upset with Hilton Head was sold.

Didn't somebody also buy this island for the timber at one time?

That was in Dr. Pierce's estate. It was for sale.

It was right after the War in the 1940s. Before Lee passed away, we talked on the phone. He had purchased another island near Hilton Head called Bull's Island. They spent quiet a bit of time out there. Even Henry went out on a few occasions and hunted with him and visited.

So just for clarification; this island, along with many other islands up the Atlantic coast was bought by wealthy individuals for their own recreation, primarily hunting?

Yes, primarily hunting. And they worked hard on duck hunting and on the duck blinds and the feeding and all of the things necessary to maintain excellent hunting. They did import animals, too, from abroad.

May I ask where the money came from to make this possible?

What I can say is that like Henry's father Alfred, and his brother-in-law, Landon Thorn, Henry Loomis and Lee Loomis worked together in partnership also. Lee Loomis was the lawyer and the one who was in the stock market. Henry chose to do work for the government in various forms, which is why in the early 1950's he was Director of the Voice of America and Deputy Director of US Information Agency. Basically, as long as Lee made enough money, why, Henry went on and did his thing for all of us, which is where he made such an outstanding contribution to all of us around the world. Being the Director of the Voice of America and later becoming the President of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Henry actually held the two leading positions of the two most important corresponding radio and television organizations in the world. He is the only person who has in fact headed both of those organizations in a lifetime. Lee made the money and Henry did his thing. They had always done well together.

Why don't you share about how Alfred made a lot of money funding utilities when electricity came through?

That's right. Alfred Loomis, with Landon, funded and did very well with utilities up in New York. They funded fifteen percent of the utilities in the United States. This was right around 1919 and 1920, before the stock market crash. They did exceptionally well and continued to do so throughout the 1920s. Then, when Alfred Loomis was abroad in 1929, he cabled back to Landon and told him to sell all of their holdings in everything.

Landon and Alfred had such a marvelous working relationship that without asking why, Landon sold all of their holdings. Landon sold his as well. They were totally solvent at the time of the crash in the 1930's. That's what made a big difference in their lives from then on. Alfred went on to be a scientist and was very instrumental in the development of radar. He brought many scientists in to Tuxedo Park where Henry was born. So Henry grew up with Nobel Laureates coming in. They were men who became Nobel Laureates later on in life. Alfred created a lab in Tuxedo Park; separate from the home that Henry grew up in. It was big, beautiful place and scientists could come in. The government then funded Alfred's scientific adventures. It would not happen again today. The government would never give money to the private sector.

Go back a little bit more. I'm trying to get the picture of how this all came about. The Loomis', in the late 1800's and early 1900's were industrialist/inventors?

Alfred was a lawyer.

Was that the first generation in the US, or was there a generation before that?

Henry's grandfather was a physician in New York. That may be the first generation over here. He was the first physician to use anesthesia. They set up a lot of Sanatoriums. That was in New York City. Alfred came in during the late 1800's. From 1910 to 1940, Alfred was predominately a financier, if you would. World War II came along and they invented a number of components that were instrumental in the war. Hilton Head came in during the war in the 30's and 40's. It progressed from there to St. Vincent.

Henry has such an interesting heredity. His grandmother traveled around all over Europe in the Bosnia area setting up homes for people to recuperate from the war. She was just an adventurous lady herself. She would go, with her Chauffeur, in her car, into the mountains. The Brigands would come to her and tell her they she was going to be robbed. She would talk her way out of it. She had no fear. All of the background of his grandparents is interesting.

Were they English?

Yes, they were from Great Britain. The woman who did the traveling in Bosnia was from maternal side of Henry's family.

Both grandfathers were physicians.

So in 1968 is when the Nature Conservancy bought this, is that correct?

Yeah.

Do you guys know why they decided to do that instead of building condominiums here?

I sat in on meetings with Mr. Henry, and Mr. Lee around a table when people were coming to look at the island. I know of some other groups that was interested in the island. They were talking about how they could build condos and do this and do that. Henry and Lee both said, "No, we don't want it developed. If we sell it, we want it kept like it is." As a matter of fact, they were offered more money than what the government offered of it. I don't know the amount, but they didn't want it developed. They wanted to keep it in its natural state.

What were some of those talks like? Do you remember the conversations that took place?

I was a youngster. No, I don't really remember details except that they wanted to build condos.

Did you have any idea at that time what that really meant?

No I didn't. I talked to Henry and to Lee while I was working for those two men. They were great men I can say that. Henry and I got on a horse and we rode and talked for several hours on afternoon and looked at the island. I tried to talk him out of selling it. It was my home. I was raised here. It meant a lot to me. But since then, when the government took it, and has kept it pretty much as natural as can be, except they've torn some of the cabins down that was here. They did that when I was in Vietnam. That was kind of somewhat of a heartbreak. But I think everything has been run satisfactory. I think that when Mr. Henry and I drove up and he got out a while ago, I think he was a little disappointed. I gathered this from looking at his face. I was watching his expressions. He was looking at the houses, and looking around. I think it was somewhat of a disappointment to him to see the houses gone. I think it bothered him. But he said when we came down on the bar down there, "It's a great day." We stopped on the island and looked around in places where we spent some time in the 1960s. He is thrilled about it.

When Henry spoke with us when we were doing the memoirs of his life said that he was very hurt by the selling of Hilton Head and he knew that the wood was going to cut down and sold. He really was kind of saddened by that. That was his home and he loved it. So when he purchased St. Vincent he wanted to make sure that didn't happen again. That's how he did it, through the Nature Conservancy.

When you drove out here, you saw all of the development along the way out here. This place could have been that way couldn't it?

Yes, just like St. Georges.

That's true.

Henry will not go back to Hilton Head. We've been up in that area a number of times, but he will not set foot on the island. I've been there, but he said, "No, I will not go back." When St. Vincent was sold in 1968, Lee went up to Bluffton, South Carolina and bought Bull Island for his family. Both he and Jenny are buried at his favorite spot out on the island. Henry didn't have an island, but Lizard Island was found by Henry's oldest daughter who talked with Frank Talbert, who at the time headed the equivalent of the Smithsonian in Sydney, Australia. Frank told her about that and Henry came back and he liked the idea of that. When Henry and I were married, we were committed at that point to continue the obligation that Henry felt that he had. So Lizard Island, through Frank Talbert and their Smithsonian equivalent now has developed the most outstanding marine biology scientific lab on the Great Barrier Reef. Lizard Island is at the very top of the Barrier Reef. The only other thing on the island is that they have a little strip of gravel runway that we flew in on. They have a very outstanding Tarpon fishing resort, which is very exotic. Next to that is the Lizard Island Research Station. Now, scientists are waiting on a long list to come over and spent a couple of weeks working at the research station. I must say that we are very proud of it. So you cannot own land in Australia, you have to lease it. So there wasn't anything there, but we did end up supporting the research station and we're very proud of it. We took David and Lisa and two of my other sons. We had a wonderful time. There's a Loomis Cottage, and a Loomis Beach. Islands are still in our family and in our blood, even though our family has expanded. It still seems to be there. We heard a grandson say today, "When I get my island...!" So I think be they Loomis' or Williams, they like the idea of islands!

Are you enjoying the idea that St. Vincent Island is a nature conservancy, or a FWS refuge?

I wish I had a better one because I was....

Are you saying that you wish you had another island?

Yeah.

Do you think he is aware of the service that he has provided to America?

Yes, it's very nice.

He's commenting now on what the island looks like. But I think that probably the service that he provided by selling to the FWS has not been something that he has dwelled on. He just has been delighted that it is there and delighted to know that it has not been

developed. But as far as keeping in touch with the activities that the FWS, he really hasn't been in touch. He's gone with other things in life.

He makes these momentous decisions and moves on.

With you and your family, and these children that are running around here, what do you they may think about what their family has provided?

It's making a huge impact on them. They see the development that goes on all around us every day. And to know that Gramps, and Gammy saved this beautiful island, and that they are responsible for it; they are very proud to know that. Maybe it will make an impact on them in their later lives to do something worthwhile.

It's been wonderful watching my daughter-in-laws, they both, and they just all love the out of doors and nature. When we've been fortunate enough to take our family on trips why, they have just thoroughly enjoyed the topography and the flora around us. To see that developing and our sons becoming birders and things like that, and we see that being passed down. All of our family loves it. All of the grandchildren love nature. I was concerned today that riding around 80 miles of dirt roads that even riding around in pickup trucks that the children might be bored and want something more exciting. In this day and age of the television and the computer they hardly have time to think beyond that. But I found that today they were just ecstatic. My sons and my daughter-in-laws were just so thrilled with what they found here. They were all saying that they don't see this very often. Even the children were feeling the uniqueness of this island, and loving it. How marvelous!

Is there anything you guys feel that I have missed as far as establishing how this place got created, who saved it and why? Did I miss something here?

I remember you telling me that this was one of the first big deals that The Nature Conservancy had accomplished at that time. So Gramps was instrumental in accomplishing something that hadn't really been done on that large of a scale before.

So in 1968 this was a new thing?

It was the biggest deal that the Nature Conservancy had done at that time. I don't remember how Henry first got involved with the Nature Conservancy but it wasn't very big back then. Somehow they found out about it and put this deal together when that just wasn't happening back then, especially for something this big.

I know that Henry worked for several years, once they decided to sell the island. I know that Henry worked full time in taking his videos and editing them. He really had photographed a great deal down here. He edited it and made a marvelous presentation for

the Nature Conservancy. I think he spent a couple of years on that. I think it was quite intense on his part because he was out of government and hadn't yet accepted the Presidency of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, when he accepted in September or October of 1972.

So it sounds like he was aggressive about going to the Nature Conservancy it that right?

I would guess it was a big tax break at that time.

Yes, I am sure it was a big tax break. That was necessary for them.

Well, like a lot of other things; we find out that the way people make money and the way they can save money on taxes can benefit everybody. So now, unless there's something else that you guys can think of, I want to move on to the biological diversity of this place. You were back in the good old days. What was it like? Can you describe this place back then? Were you here before they brought in the exotic animals?

I was here during the time they brought the exotics over here. The sandbar deer were brought here by Dr. Pierce. The cows, zebra, élan, black buck, pheasants, quail... Mr. Henry and Mr. Lee Loomis brought those over here.

Do you have any idea about what it was like before? Maybe your father talked about it.

There was a bunch of deer here, even when we lived here early on. My dad and I killed some of the deer. These were white tail deer and pigs. The sandbar deer, there was quite a few here during Mr. Loomis' time. I would say more so than there are now. We do hunt them now.

The Sandbar deer were brought from where?

They brought here from India to the best of my understanding. I heard that they had brought a pair over here. There was probably somewhere in the neighborhood of sixty or seventy-five animals.

Why did they bring them?

I think Dr. Pierce brought them here to hunt. In reading some of the monographs that I've got, he was a big hunter. One of his things was big game. He loved to hunt wild bulls. There were some cows here back then, but the Loomis brothers along with Mr. Jay Schuller they brought the cows over here. They tried that. I don't think it amounted to too much. They upgraded the stock and put a lot of Bremmer cattle over here. They did fairly well.

How did these new animals change the topography and the flora? What did they eat? I've often wondered about that.

We had a barn out here and we fed the livestock. We kept horses over here. We would feed the horses and milk cow. But the rest of the other livestock pretty much made it on their own. Sometimes during the winter months we'd put out a little bit of hay. But other than that, you'd see them out a lot along the dunes where we'd done controlled burning. All of that new growth would come out. The cows would love to come out behind a burn, as well as wildlife; the deer and what have you, and feed on that.

About the controlled burning, that was just something that people did as farmers and cattle raisers in this part of the country, is that right?

Yes, to bring new grasses up so the animals could use it. I can remember the Forest Service coming over and helping to do some controlled burning. They ploughed fire lines and used the roads. All the roads we've got are along the firebreaks. They control burned.

In the 1940's this had to have been the middle of nowhere.

It had to be!

How far was it to the nearest doctor, and stuff like that?

I don't know about that! I know that during my time you had to go to Apalachicola. We either had to get on a boat or barge to go to town. I don't think we had but one doctor.

Can you kind of walk us through a year, and it's four seasons and tell us what you'd do during the year?

During the winter months is usually when the Loomis brothers would come down. Their big thing was duck hunting. We'd keep up the duck blinds. There was a lot of ducks. We provided for them. We put out a lot of what we called yellow gold corn along with the drawdowns on the ponds. Most of them were natural drawdowns and you'd have millet, you know, wild millet come up. The ducks liked to feed on that. Back then we had a lot of ducks in the flyway coming our way. They may have come down in the spring to do a little fishing. But during the hot summer months you didn't hear from the Loomis brothers!

I'll tell you why Robert. During those summer months both Henry and Lee were sailing. They loved to sail, both of them. As a matter of fact, in 1935 Henry and Lee; and at that point Henry was 16 and Lee was 20 they went to the Britt brothers out of Boston and had a boat built. It was a Crocker designed boat. Its name was Lands End and Lands End

was ten tons. She was 35 on the line with a boom kit and a bow spread. Her mainsail was 55 feet. She was mahogany and teak wood deck. She drew six feet and she was absolutely magnificent. These two boys took off to the Labradors when Henry was 16 and Henry was 20. Their mother did not want them to go, so she went to Alfred and pleaded. She said, "I don't want the boys to go". Farney the middle boy wanted to go over and climb Nandidavi. He was in the first American group to go up with Tilman to climb Nandidavi. He did get frostbite way up at one of the upper camps and never made it to the absolute top. But he was in the first exploration to go up. Debbie said, "Alfred, you're going to kill all four of our sons!" And I understand that Alfred said, "Debbie, don't worry, three is not sufficient to make a scientific judgment! How can you prove a thing?" So consequently Farney went off to climb a mountain and Henry and Lee went up to sail up in the Labradors. The tales that Henry has told us about that as a sixteen year old are great. At one point they lashed him to the mainsail and threw the cabin door overboard. When you're a horrible storm and you throw something overboard to stabilize yourself. Henry was on watch in the middle of the night and he was washed overboard. The only reason that he survived is that he was lashed to the mainsail. They had a horrendous trip up into the Labradors. I used to laugh at some of the stories he would tell. A bath was to dive into the ocean. When my Floridian sons when sailing up at Lands End, up in Maine Henry dove over to his morning dip in the Maine waters. Henry and Lee sailed. Lee was one of the promoters for the America's Cup and did a great deal of sailing.

Robert, you'll have to pick up the story on St. Vincent. I remember you and I remember you as being pretty young.

I was young! I quit school when I was fifteen and came out to work here. One of the first jobs I had was trying to feed these animals, the elen and the zebra to try and get them to come back into the corral. All of the feed they'd buy would be in 100 lb. bags. It was tough getting 100 lbs of corn or sweet feed on your back to tote it out and pour it out where they could get to it. But I can remember doing that. And I can remember building the corrals up. The zebras, once you got them in the corrals; they weren't but six or eight feet tall; they could jump over. So I built the corrals up to twelve feet. The zebra would still run and jump up high on it. Trying to pen everything up, and the zebras was a handful. Trying to catch all of the cows was quite an ordeal. We had some guys come over and we had horses. They would catch the cows and tie them up somewhat like my dad did when he was here. Then they'd go around in the afternoon and put them in the truck and bring them back and put them in the corral. It was a regular round up. I rode in a lot of those. I was a youngster and I can remember riding and setting in the saddle. I would sit sideways cause after a while it could wear you out! I don't know how they could ride all day, day in and day out! I can remember as a kid one time they were trying to bring in a bull that was caught in the mud. They couldn't get him out. They hooked my horse to him. When you tied onto the horn of the saddle and you go to pulling, the saddle turns around on the side, it's not a good feeling. As a kid, I had quite a few good

experiences. Back then we had a lot of Sea Turtles that used the beach. We didn't do anything like we do now. We put screens over the nests to keep the predators out. Back then we didn't do that. I don't know what the success rate was as far as what made it and what didn't.

I don't want to get you into any trouble now, because I'm not sure what the statute to limitations is...

I didn't do it!

But I know that my family was raised in this part of the county. We ate Gopher Tortoises. Look at him; he's looking at the ceiling! I'll bet your family got Sea Turtle eggs too didn't they?

Have you ever heard the expression hear no evil, speak no evil?

But seriously, at that time in the 1940s and 1950s, we were all doing that weren't we? That's why they're on the endangered species list.

I don't know what the... Well, we did once in a while. I have heard my grandmother when they would come down they always wanted to try a sea turtle eggs. She liked them because she said you could haul them around and not break them. They were flexible. I can remember that they talked about eating sea turtles eggs, but I don't remember eating them much. We didn't eat any gopher tortoises, there weren't that many here. The soft-shelled turtles, we ate those. We tried gators, but back then there was too many gators. That was part of the deal for my dad. With the labs [hunting dogs] working the ducks, they wanted all of the gators shot. And you could sell the hides back then. That's how a lot of the money on the side was made; skin the gators and sell the hides. In the videos, they show of that, some of the older ones. We lost some dogs to alligators. My dad had some dogs that he worked the cows with. On several occasions they'd come in and they would lose a dog. He'd talk about losing a dog. After they'd come in from working the cows in the real hot weather they'd stop to water the horses or something. The dogs might get in the water and the next thing you know there's one gone. A gator got him. I can remember that happened and then everybody laid for that gator. They'd go back to that area that night and do away with him.

Was there any spraying at that time with DDT and that sort of thing?

I don't remember any DDT being sprayed. We had a little marsh cutter, a sickle cutter. We done a lot of that. We done a little spraying for cattails, but I don't remember what the chemical was.

What about quail hunting? You know up at Bull Island, that Lee bought it was primarily quail hunting. They'd put the quail out set it up in such a way that they had a cock that they released.

Over here, they shot some pheasants. They released a lot of pheasants to try to get them established. But they couldn't make it here. They released a lot of quail. We had feeders on these roads every quarter of a mile; we had a bird feeder with a wooden corral around it three feet tall. We'd go up and fill them once a week. And like I said, there was one for every quarter of a mile, you had them set up. You could see quail everywhere and turkeys too. But right now there's not a turkey on here, that I'm aware of, or a quail.

Henry is a crackerjack shot. Oh my, he is excellent with a rifle but he is fantastic with a shotgun.

I would imagine! I knew back then that he was!

He tried to teach me, and I did fairly well, but I accidentally shot two with one blast and I put the gun down. I said, "That's it!" And I haven't done it since! Henry is a magnificent shot on any of the upland birds.

In the ponds, I would put Henry and Mr. Lee in a boat with their families and take them up and put them in the blinds and leave them in the mornings. Those were some of the coldest days of my life. Man, were they cold! But I'd take them up and put them in the blinds and they'd tell me when to come back and get them. I'd got back and they had ducks piled in the boat. They had the limit to say the least.

The limits were high.

The limits were very high, that's true. And believe me, they had the limit...for the days that they didn't go too!

What about the different types of ducks that were being shot? Did you have wood ducks?

They were wood ducks, mallards, pintails, widgeons, it was a mixed bag.

I assumed there would be.

There was red heads and canvasbacks. On the bays around the beaches, you could hit the beach and run all the way up to Dry Bar and there would be rafts of ducks just as far as you could see them! On the ponds over here, you could just turn the clouds dark with ducks. It was unreal.

And they are not here now?

No, they are not here like that, no.

What about the other bird life? I'm thinking of the egrets and blue herons.

We've got some rookeries over here. Lake Five is a rookery with blue heron and others, and egrets.

What about your eagles?

We've got several eagle nests that are active. And we close those areas off during the family hunts to keep people out of there.

I would think there would be a lot of Osprey.

We've got a lot of Osprey. We sure do.

Are any birds like the scarlet ibises, or ...?

Not that I am aware of.

What about the wood stork?

Yeah, I see some wood storks on occasion. You'll see a raft of white pelicans ever once in a while around the islands.

How about snakes, Robert?

Yeah, we got a few snakes.

Which one did you just reintroduce?

They put the indigos over here several years ago. But I haven't seen one lately. I wouldn't say that they're not here, but I haven't seen one lately.

Robert, tell me the size of the rattlesnakes.

Well right now, it's about 4 foot.

How big around?

Some of them are yeah big! [Demonstrating by making a circle with his fingers.]

Oooh, that's big!

No, there are some big snakes here. You know, early on, some of the old timers will tell you that there is a history with St. Vincent's and rattlesnakes. They had a bounty on them in the 1940's. I've talked with some of the loggers before they passed on and they said that they could make more money killing rattlesnakes than they could driving a log truck. They paid a bounty on rattlers.

Earlier you started to say something about how in the summer you didn't see the Loomis brothers. This is not a paradise all year round is it? What about summer time? What's it like here?

When school was out we stayed over here during the hot months. My oldest brother and I, our bed was on the porch. We had a screen, but they were some hot nights! It was hot and muggy. We'd love for it to rain. A lot of times it would rain and quit, and then it was muggy. There was chiggers and ticks. The "noseeums". Mosquitoes and ticks I guess were the worst.

As a kid, did you even pay any attention to all of that stuff?

Yeah, but not nothing like you do now.

Mr. Loomis: Now we have bug sprays and things.

Yeah, now we have bug spray or whatever now. But back then we didn't. I don't remember any bug spray.

I think both Lee and Henry were impervious to anything like that when they have a gun in their hands! Whether it's hot or cold, or bugs or no bugs!

Henry would bring gas... [Tape #1 ends. Starting tape #2]

....is 53 now and Robert Gay is only 51.

No, 52. I'll be 53 soon.

See he's younger than Pix, and you've got Timmy and Pixie. He's more Lucy and David's age.

I would envision Robert being down here and being young and being from the country. And here's Henry coming down and Lee. They'd be out there having their cigars and out there hunting.

What they liked about it was that I would stay here all of the time. They would bring guests down. Their guests would get with me and I would haul them around. I was a guide.

On horseback.

I would take them around. They would shoot sand bar deer. [When he says it, it sounds like “sanbur” deer.], and white tailed deer, or whatever. That’s what his guests liked about it. Henry was good. He’d say, “Get with Robert if you want to kill a Sand bar.” I knew where to take them, and I would do that. On one instance, I don’t know who it was, but Henry had a guy down here; we had a little old Jeep with a half cover on the top. The way we did it was that I would drive and the guy would stand up and lay his rifle on the top. I can remember seeing a deer, stopping and the guy scoped the deer out. It wasn’t something he wanted, or something to that affect. But he took his gun off of safety. We was riding, and all of a sudden the gun went off. Booom! In that windshield on the Jeep, there was a metal bar right in the middle. That bullet went right through that metal bar on the Jeep! He remembers! [Mr. Henry gives indication that he remembers the incident.] But I came back up here. Boy, it scared me! I brought him back up here. But I told Mr. Henry, “This guy is crazy!” When he seen what happened he told him, “You better just quit for the day.” I didn’t have to take him hunting anymore and that made my day. I don’t know who he was, but it sure scared me!

I know that Henry and Lee were both meticulous when it came to hunting etiquette. They would not stand for anybody that would fool around with a gun. There was absolutely no drinking or anything else.

Absolutely! Oh, they were safe ones! That’s why he stopped that hunt. One other time Henry had some people over here and there was a raft of red head ducks along the beach. A guy set up behind a stump with a Lab and an over and under shotgun. I remember that. I don’t know if the dog knocked the gun down, or how the gun fell, but I remember the guy coming up here in a Jeep. He had his legs tied up. The gun had went off blew his leg off, right here. Not a doctor around. But he had put a belt around his leg and crawled for about a hundred yards and got in the Jeep and drove it up here. They took him off and that’s the last time I seen him.

I know that that happened. I’ve heard that story from Henry on a number of occasions.

I was here when that happened and we went....I wasn’t sure where it happened, but Henry and somebody else went out with the guy. I went with his kids, and we went all over the island. We finally found the gun. We found were it happened, up on Dry Bar at the tip end of the island. You could see then what had happened and where he had to crawl. I was surprised that he made it.

I know Henry was surprised.

The hunting was great. The deer hunting was great. The fishing was fabulous.

I know that your wife is here, so you might not really be able to answer this question truthfully, but what is the most memorable time that you can recall out here on this island when you were growing up? Without getting yourself into any trouble.

No, I'm not going to get in any trouble! 'Cause believe it or not, that's the only girlfriend I've ever had! My Dad passed away in 1964 and right after that, her family moved from Pensacola to Wiwahitcheka and on to Apalachicola. I met my wife in late '64 or early '65. I don't know, we just, that was my first girlfriend. My only girlfriend. The trouble with staying over here and working was I'd want to go and see her. And I had to live here. This was after my dad passed away. I'd want to leave and go see my girlfriend in town and I had every other weekend off. Sometimes I'd sneak off the island and go. They'd have a program going on or something. But other than that.... Oh, I've had some great times!

She didn't sneak over here?

No, I'd sneak off of here and go over there! [Mr. Henry makes grumbling noises of disapproval in jest. All laugh]

But other than that, are there just times that you remember on this place? Is there something about the wildlife, the beauty of it or anything that just really sticks in your mind?

Well, spending time with my Dad here. Like I say, he died when I was 13 and I had killed deer, hogs.... He treated me more like a friend than a son. We spend time together on the weekends. I was the next to the oldest son. The oldest son was married. I would come back and spend the weekends with my Dad when he had the duty. It was just he and I. That was some great memories. Coming back to work for the first time after my Dad passed away, they gave me his bedroom. There was a little table in there where my Dad took his stuff out and put it. He wore overalls. He'd take his stuff out of his pockets and put it on that table. The first night I was here... I did pretty good that day when they hired me back a couple of years after my Dad passed away. So, I went in that room, and I was filling the man's shoes, but I sure missed my Dad. That same table where he put his stuff, I did the same. You just dump your pockets out when you change clothes. It took me several nights to get back on the right track. That was a tough job. And riding the horse that he rode and worked cows with, with the same saddle. I let a lot of tears go down over here on this island trying to get over that. And I still love him and miss him today, but I wouldn't trade my life that I've had over here for nothing. It's been a great

life. And I've raised my kids over here. I brought my kids. I've got a son who is 28 and a daughter who is going on 23. They spent a lot of time over here as kids. They wouldn't have it any other way either. I've got a great family, and a great wife. I wouldn't trade it.

I don't suppose it would have been possible without the Loomis boys would it?

No it wouldn't, and Mr. Loomis was good to me. When they left here in 1968 they was very generous. They gave me a Jeep, a trailer. He and Lee gave me two horses. I don't know if I should say this or not, but his other wife Paula didn't like me too much. She was kind of a rough character, but a great lady too. She and I had different views.

When Lee and Henry would leave, would they give you a little something after every trip?

Well, at Christmas time, I always looked forward to it as a kid. We spent Christmas over here and we'd look for them. They'd always bring us a gift. You know how kids are. We always looked forward to them coming and bringing Christmas to us.

George, you know it's getting a little late now for us. I am sorry not to continue, but our families have come back. And if you don't mind, it's such a special day and we won't be back on the island tomorrow.

I've got one last question. What makes such a special day?

Well, It's particularly special because this sweet man is 84 years old today. So it's Henry's 84th birthday.

He don't look 84!

I know it! On the card I'm going to give him I wrote, "I sure would have to have you look a little older! You're getting older now, start looking that way!"

Henry is 84, and they have made so much possible for all of us and for the world in saving this place. It's a wonderful story.

Mrs. Loomis: I didn't really have anything to do with saving this island, but we have enjoyed other things that we are very proud of. And we've been very fortunate to be able to share it with my sons and their families and our grandchildren. That's very, very special. We've loved it. And Henry's sons and daughters too. We have a very lovely extended family. [Conversation ends. Tape picks up and Robert Gay is outside with ladies at a later time as tape continues.]

You know that picture that you got painted? That's the pond right there.

Oh, this is the pond where Ogden Plycner painted those two watercolors. Do you remember? We've got the original watercolors that he painted for Henry. There are two of them.

There used to be a walk way that went out there and that's where we had a duck blind.

Mr. Gay: If you remember, there was a bridge here, a small bridge. But we took it out. My brother and I, we built this structure here so we could hold water higher in lakes four and five. There was a small bridge. This is where we duck hunted at. This took you up into lakes four and five. We had a lot of duck blinds on the back side of lake four. Mr. Henry loved to hunt in there. He loved to fish in lake five. Most of the time when we fished we'd go up and come in the old road and go it that area. We had some good fishing before the storm. We put a few fish back now as far as restocking. But we haven't completed the project. One we complete it, it will be good. Mr. Henry, do you remember going up all in there? The water was shallow. But I remember you wading and it being about that deep on you! Look there's an alligator! See his head? I don't know where all the gators are. Usually, they lay all up in here.

Mr. Gentry: What is your name? [Addressing a young girl.]

Nadie Williams.

What do you think about this place?

It's very interesting. I've never been to a place like this before. Except Cumberland is kind of like this.

Do you recognize, or understand the significance of what your grandfather had to do with this place?

Yeah. I remember when we were in the car he pointed at this tree that he recognized because it is in all the pictures at my grandmother's house.

Do you know that he is responsible, really, for preserving this place over the years! It was his family and it's your family now.

Yeah. I didn't know it before, but I do now. It's very cool to know that people can do that. Could preserve it and keep it like this. It's very unique.

Mr. Gentry: [to another, younger child] what do you think of all of this?

I really like it. I just like being in the wild and stuff. It's really fun.

What do you think about your grandfather and the fact that helped to preserve this?

Well, it's pretty cool because he actually hunted here. And it's just fun to see him come back and to see how he reacts to how... I don't know... he's reacting to being back here.

How is he reacting to being back here?

Well, he's got a bigger smile than usual. And I think that's pretty cool.

Do you think this is a good place and it's safe for other people to use too?

Yeah! It's fun. I think other people would enjoy it.

What is your name?

I'm Lindy Williams. What do you think about this place?

It's got along of wildlife and everything and it's got a lot of bugs. But it's really good for people like my Mom who really, really like the outdoors and stuff. I like it too.

What about your grandfather? When you see him out here, what do you think?

He smiles a lot. I think it brings back a lot of memories for him of things he doesn't really see a lot, and stuff.

Did you know that he and his family saved this place for all of America?

Yeah, I just found that out a couple of days ago.

Tell me what you found out.

My Mom was telling us that we were going to St. Vincent's Island. I was wondering why, and she told us that Gramps used to own it. When I found that out it was like...wow! That was really all I knew.

Do you know what kind of place it is now, or what it's for?

Just to show people wildlife and stuff?

Yes, that sound's good.

My name is Finley Williams. [teenaged boy] I think this place is really neat with all of the different animals you can see. We haven't seen too much. There was a deer, and they said a rattlesnake was on the road earlier.

Do you know what kind of a place this is now?

It's a National Wildlife Refuge.

Do you know what the purpose of the NWR is?

To preserve, for everyone else to see.

Did you know that your grandfather had a lot to do with this becoming a refuge?

I knew that he sold it to the Conservancy, so it would become a refuge.

Can you tell me the story about what you know about this place and how it relates to your grandfather?

I know that he bought it for a couple hundred thousand. And he basically sold it pretty cheaply to the Conservancy because he owned Hilton Head and that was developed. I guess he wanted to preserve this because it's so beautiful, for everyone else to see.

I am Andrew Williams.

What do you think about all of this?

I think it's beautiful. It reminds me a lot of Cumberland Island. We go there periodically.

Does this place have the same kind of purpose that Cumberland Island does?

Well, this is actually a lot less developed than Cumberland. Cumberland has more houses on it. I think this is a lot bigger and more beautiful than Cumberland also.

Do you know what part your grandfather played in preserving this place?

I didn't know that he owned this. I knew he owned an island, or used to, but I didn't know it was this one, or know about this island at all. But when my Mom told us about it and how we were going up here I thought it was really great. She told us the entire story about it.

What was that story?

It was about how Gramps' father had given them an island, kind of, but houses were put on it and they sold it to the state. Then they state gave it to the refuge people.

Do you think it's good that other folks can come out and enjoy it like you have?

Yes. If he still owned it, and he didn't let other people on it, I think that would be pretty sad because everyone should get to experience it. It's a really nice place.

I am John Williams. [Adult male]

What did this trip today mean to you? What did you get out of it?

A couple of things. I think it's kind of exciting to see a barrier island in the Gulf in its natural state. And what the topography looks like from the Bay side and from the Gulf side. It's good to meet Robert Gay, the curator of the island since 1953. It's good to see that our government is doing some good stuff on a natural environmental setting.

What did you enjoy most about the trip?

Meeting you.

Oh, good answer!

I loved the chance to see the barrier island. I love to see the changes in the land where the types of trees change from oaks to pines and the freshwater lakes being this close to the Gulf.

[Large family group is walking around, and looking at the out of doors]

Robert, what do you think is special about today?

Well, it's been 35 years since I've seen Mr. Loomis. I've talked with him on the phone a couple of times a year up to about four years ago before he got sick. He always wanted to come back. But today is his birthday, and it's been 35 years. It's been a great day to have him back on the refuge and renew an old friendship. We go back a long ways, from 1953 to 2003. That's a long time to know somebody, and still be friends. We have relived some old memories. A lot of the old places we visited, the last time we were there I was taking him hunting. It was very special to him, and to me.

Mr. Gentry: [addressing Mrs. Henry Loomis]: What was so special about today?

Oh my! Well, the most important thing of course, and selfishly, was that it was Henry's 84th birthday. He was born in 1919, on April the 19th. Then, it's the very first time that Henry has been back to St. Vincent Island since he and Lee sold the island to the Nature Conservancy in 1968. This is the first time he's set foot on the island since then and he loved every minute of it.

What about you?

On my! I've heard so many marvelous stories about St. Vincent that I felt that I knew the island. But you have to see it to really believe it. And to have something so very special, kept, for all of us to enjoy means the world to me and to my sons and their wives and to all of our grandchildren. We are very fortunate to be a part of being here today. Thank you for being with us!

Mr. Gentry: [addressing another female, unrelated to family] What was the purpose of this today?

The purpose was to try to gather as much history as we can while Mr. Loomis is still living. It is a good opportunity to meet the Loomis family and find out why they wanted to sell St. Vincent for conservation.

How important were the Loomis family to St. Vincent, and to the NWR System?

The Loomis brothers were the people who sold the island to the Nature Conservancy who then sold it to us for a NWR. They chose to sell it so that it would be preserved as a conservation area, as opposed to being developed. So they prevented this area from being developed.

I am David Williams. [adult male] I guess we've seen paintings and pictures of St. Vincent. It was meaningful to me to actually come and see all of the beautiful landscapes and vistas here, live and in person, like we had seen in the paintings back in Jacksonville.

Just this past weekend I was down in the Everglades, in the extreme southern end of Florida. And then to be in the northern end, in the panhandle, on an island where you have pine trees, palms and magnolias, it made me realize what a great give-back the whole island was to the State of Florida, to all of us who live in Florida.

I am Lisa Williams, married to David Williams. Seeing this beauty today was really special. I haven't seen this anywhere. The land, we've seen a box turtle, and all types of birds. We've seen it all, and it's all so unusual nowadays. Well, just because of knowledge that Gramps, Henry Loomis who once owned this and wanted to keep it for perpetuity the way it once was so that everybody can see it. That's pretty special.

I'm Peggy Sue Williams. Everything was special about today. It was just a great day. I think really two things stand out. One is that Henry can come back here and sort of team up with Robert and revisit some places. Second, it's sort of a neat piece of the puzzle of his memories and what not. It's been pretty cool and lots of fun.

I am Monica Harris, Assistant Refuge Manager here at St. Vincent. It was a great, beautiful sunny day, with a nice breeze and I got a great opportunity to meet some really neat people. I learned a little about the history of what used to be here. It's really special to meet someone who actually used to own this island.

[Group of family, friends and USFWS employees take boat back to mainland]