

# THE LOUISIANA TRAPPERS' WAR

GREED, MONEY, LAND  
AND POWER COMBINED  
INTO A SHORT, YET  
VIOLENT CONFLICT IN THE  
SOUTHERN SWAMPS.

BY **SCOT H. DAHMS**

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The trapping world is full of amazing history, with tales of heroics, danger, conflict and mystery. One particular incident that many probably have never heard of, was a little-known war between trappers in Louisiana in the 1920s. The war resulted in one fatality and 11 wounded people. It was a classic example of people with power and money overextending their control over poor, uneducated folks. In addition, there was a language difference that exacerbated the affair. The conflict occurred in St. Bernard Parish and affected the residents of Delacroix Island.

Delacroix Island is 35 miles southeast of New Orleans' French Quarter and served as the home of the Islenos, Spanish-speaking descendants of Canary Islanders. Due to the different language spoken, the Delacroix Islenos were socially isolated from neighboring communities. They hunted, fished and trapped the marshes for their livelihood. They were a close-knit community that lived in primitive conditions. The Islenos drank water from cisterns, lacked electricity, had no formal education system and were left alone to fend for themselves with no outside interference.

In the 1920s, the community received interest from outsiders for two reasons — prohibition and muskrat fur. Liquor and muskrats were easily obtained in the marshes, and since the Islenos shared a common language with the Cubans, they easily acquired liquor from them.

Bootlegging was a respected profession in the marshes back then and Manuel Molero, an Isleno, was one of the South's most successful bootleggers. Manuel was self-educated and wealthy because of his business ventures. He acquired property in the marshes and became heavily involved in the muskrat business.

Sheriff L.A. Meraux was the main law enforcement officer in St. Bernard Parish at the time. Meraux aligned himself with Alexander Perez, who had won a judgeship in Plaquemines Parish in 1920. By 1924, Perez had become district attorney of both St. Ber-



A trapper checking  
his trap for a muskrat  
in the marshland near  
Delacroix Island.



A Spanish trapper returning to camp after checking his traps. On the right, pelts are drying.

nard and Plaquemines parishes. In the same year, Claude Meraux, the sheriff's brother, was elected as a district judge in both St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes.

Before muskrat prices increased, no one cared about the ownership of the marshes and the Islenos did not worry about land titles as they trapped where they had always trapped. After the Swamp Act of 1850, The U.S. government gave the marshes to the state of Louisiana. Then the state sold or leased the land for pennies per acre. Many of the owners did not pay the taxes and the ownership reverted back to the state.

When muskrat pelts began to increase in price, former landowners wanted to reclaim the land. So the state legislature obliged and passed a law allowing the delinquent taxes to be paid by the landowners to reclaim their properties. Then, land companies purchased every available parcel of land that was not reclaimed by individuals. The Phillips Land Company purchased 100,000 acres. In 1924, John R. Perez, Leander's cousin, leased the land from Phillips. He then subleased it to E.P. Brady, who represented the Delaware-Louisiana Fur Trapping Company. Brady then proceeded to demand payment from the Islenos for the right to trap on the land.

Of course, the Islenos trappers refused to pay the leases and continued to trap the land, which by this time had been posted with "No Trespassing" signs. Ironically, they could not read them, but they would not have obeyed them anyway. The new

landowners hired outside trappers who were subsequently harassed by the Islenos. To protect them from harassment, armed guards were hired. The guards were armed with court orders and firearms. And they weren't afraid to shoot at the Islenos who tried to trap without paying.

It didn't take long before the Islenos knew that they needed someone with legal experience to help them with this issue. They chose Leander, who they believed could assist them with acquiring the legal right to trap where they always had. Leander organized the St. Bernard Trappers Association. The board of directors deferred completely to Leander. He edited the association minutes, put association funds into his personal bank account, paid the bills and dominated the meetings. Leon Meraux was the association's treasurer and first cousin of the sheriff.

Benny Harris was the association's secretary. He took notes on loose-leaf paper at the meetings, transported the notes to Leander's office, and then Leander drafted the minutes. The originals were then discarded.

In November of 1924, Leander called a meeting and set the fees for the trappers to trap legally. The cost was \$50 in dues and \$50 in lease payments and the trappers could continue to trap their respective territories. Since the trappers were enjoying good harvests and healthy profits, the amounts did not concern them. John Perez, who held the leases, collected \$6,500 during the 1925-1926 season and \$8,000 during the

1926-1927 season.

A stockholder's meeting was held on September 21, 1925, to select new directors. State law required that stockholders be duly notified to elect new directors. Harris notified the public using notices placed on the wrappers of bread distributed by the Meraux and Leon Bakery. Most of the shareholders were illiterate, did not buy bread and were not concerned with the association, as they thought Leander would represent their best interests.

At that meeting, the Leander-dominated board transferred the lease from John Perez to J. Walter Michel from New Orleans. He had been the best man in Leander's wedding.

The final draft of the transfer included provisions not approved by the board of directors. They stated that each trapper had to be personally acceptable to Michel, and John Perez could cancel the lease by using his option to purchase. The major change that attracted the most attention was that the \$50 annual lease fee had been increased to \$150.

Some of the outraged trappers turned to Manuel, the bootlegger, for assistance to get exemption from the \$150 fee. Oliver Livaudais was Manuel's attorney, who quickly discovered that fraud had occurred.

On April 12, 1926, a meeting of around 800 trappers occurred at the St. Bernard Parish Courthouse. They demanded that the lease of Michel's be nullified. Brooks



A trapper's son with stretched skins in hands.

Molero, president of the St. Bernard Trappers Association called his nephew, Manuel, to the podium where he was elected as the chairman of the meeting. The trappers demanded Leander's resignation, but he refused.

Livaudais pointed out the irregularities with the transfer to Michel, including that only three of the nine board directors attended the meeting. Leander refused to accept Manuel as meeting chairman. Leander and Manuel nearly came to blows, but they were held apart by the trappers.

The trappers adopted a resolution that the transfer of the lease to Michel should be declared null and void. They also passed another resolution demanding Leander's resignation, but he failed to honor that motion.

Following the meeting, the Leander-controlled board of directors met in private and adopted a series of counter-resolutions. They accused Livaudais of making false statements and endorsed the Michel transfer.

The trappers had to decide which faction to support. The majority decided to follow Manuel and be represented by Livaudais.

On April 20, Brooks filed suit in Orleans Parish District Court to have the Michel transfer annulled. Three days after filing the suit, Brooks fell ill and resigned as president. The St. Bernard Parish clerk of court brought a prepared letter of resignation to

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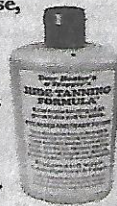
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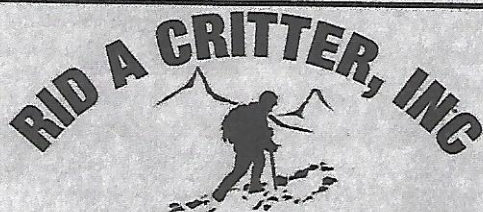
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his bedside. He signed it.

Victor Morales was quickly installed by the board of directors as the new president. He was the courthouse janitor and not a trapper. The board voted to discontinue the suit against Michel and to keep Leander as counsel for the association. After his health improved, Brooks rescinded his resignation, saying that it had been handled improperly and that he intended to continue the suit about the Michel transfer.

Once in court, there were five cases pending concurrently. During the cases, several fights broke out in the courthouse between the opposing factions.

Benito Molero, nephew of Brooks, said that he had been beaten up in jail following his arrest for assault. His arrest stemmed from members of the Leander faction allegedly attacking him with broken bottles and knives.

John Dunn, who testified against Leander, was arrested for allegedly using abusive and obscene language with a woman. While in jail, he claimed that Chief Deputy Dutch Rowley and other deputies beat him. Sheriff Meraux said that he deserved it because he resisted the deputies.

On May 7, Leander had Livaudais, Manuel and 140 trappers arrested and charged with criminal libel stemming from allegations contained in the lawsuit against him. Livaudais did not spend the night in jail though as he was able to get a writ from Louisiana Supreme Court Judge Charles O'Neil.

On May 17, Livaudais asked Judge Mark Boatner for a continuance because he did not have time to examine the association's minutes and accounts. He claimed that the books had been withheld to keep him from examining them. They had been previously removed from the court's custody by Leander's associates to prepare a tax return. Judge Boatner agreed and ordered the books kept in court.

Testimony in court focused on questions involving the propriety of keeping the association minutes, lack of adequate notice of the board of directors meeting when the Michel transfer was approved, and board membership by non-stockholders.

On July 22, Judge Boatner nullified the lease to Michel. He based his decision on the lack of consideration given to individual members of the association. Leander immediately announced he would appeal to the Louisiana Supreme Court.

On September 20, two groups of trappers met at the St. Bernard Parish Courthouse to select their board of directors. They each claimed to represent the St. Bernard Trappers Association. The group led by Livaudais and Manuel represented 267 trappers. The group led by Leander had 100 trappers. The Leander faction retained Meraux as treasurer and Harris as secretary.

The Islenos trappers started to mark their territories in the marsh as they hoped for a favorable court outcome from the Louisiana Supreme Court. John Perez filed an injunction in district court to prevent the trappers from trespassing. Then Leander filed suit to have his group recognized as the legitimate St. Bernard Trappers Association and to disband the Manuel group.

On October 26, the district court upheld the injunction filed by John Perez to keep the Livaudais and Manuel faction trappers from trapping on his property. Then the Louisiana Supreme Court overturned Boatner's decision to nullify the lease to Michel.

Even with the decisions, the Islenos did as they pleased. John Perez recruited trappers as far away as Lake Charles, Louisiana, and Orange, Texas. He also hired guards, including former Texas Rangers, to protect his holdings. The Islenos armed themselves in anticipation of future trouble.

Rudolph Cheraine was one of the outside trappers recruited by Perez. He owned the Delores, an oyster boat, which he moored near Canavon, at Camp Mandeville, Louisiana. At approximately 11:00 p.m., a small boat filled with heavily armed men demanded

Spanish trapper's camp near Delacroix Island.



to use the Delores.

John Asher, a former Texas Ranger and a commissioned deputy sheriff in St. Bernard Parish, led the band of Perez agents. Asher told Cheraine that they were going to Delacroix Island. Machine guns were included in the armaments on the commandeered boat, Delores.

The Islenos learned of the vessel's route and prepared for its arrival. On the morning of November 16, 1926, the Delores approached Delacroix Island via Bayou Gentilly. At about 8:00 a.m., the boat rounded the bend into Bayou Terre aux Boeufs where 200 armed Islenos lined the levee.

Witnesses on shore claimed that the first shots came from the boat, while those on the boat said that the trappers fired first. Samuel Gowland, who was manning one of the machine guns, fell to the deck, dead from several bullets. The Dolores' fuel tank was punctured by a bullet. After running out of gas, the boat drifted until it became lodged on a sandbar.

Asher and the others swam to shore and were captured by the Islenos. The trappers spared their lives only after they signed prepared statements saying that Perez sent them there to protect his estate by shooting to kill, and that the deputies fired first.

Those on the boat received the worst of the firefight. Charlie Kerr, another Texas Ranger, suffered wounds in the shootout and received a fractured skull from being beaten over the head with guns after being captured. Steve Drury was wounded three times and escaped by hiding in the marsh all day. Edward Malbrough took a bullet through the hand as he raised his arms to surrender. Grover Allen received three gunshots and a skull fracture. Larry Elliot burned his leg on the boat's engine manifold as he dove for cover. Lena Morales Gallardo, a bystander on shore, was also wounded.

After the shootout, the trappers sent the community's women and children elsewhere for their own safety. They then cut down trees to block the roads leading into the area. The Islenos openly announced that they would defy any attempt by Sheriff Meraux to enforce the law.

Gowland's body stayed on the deck of the boat until midafter-

noon. Coroner A.C. Gonzales arrived, along with Henry Morales, who was Gowland's father-in-law, and George St. Germain, Gowland's brother-in-law, to claim the body.

The Islenos trappers searched for and intended to kill Leander,

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but he had escaped with his family across the Mississippi River. Adam Ansardi led a group of 200 men through the marsh to drive the outside trappers from the area.

In the meantime, Sheriff Meraux had 400 arrest warrants for trappers, but he chose not to enter the area to make the arrests. Meraux approached U.S. Marshal Victor Loisel for assistance, but he refused. Leander asked New Orleans Superintendent of Police Thomas Healy for assistance, and he also refused, saying that he did not have the authority for such an action. Meraux asked Governor Oramel H. Simpson to declare martial law in St. Bernard. The governor responded by making a visit to Delacroix Island.

On November 18, Governor Simpson toured the town and visited an establishment. There he found about 35 men peacefully assembled to escape the rain. He told them who he was and asked if he could search the establishment. They approved and he found no weapons.

The governor mailed a letter to Sheriff Meraux after the visit. He blasted Meraux for not exercising his authority as Sheriff and warned that he would exercise his civil authority only when it was demonstrated that the law could not be exercised. Since they could not garner outside assistance, Perez capitulated and said that the sheriff's forces were not sufficient to cope with the situation, and they would just have to enforce the law as best as they could.

The Trappers' War came to an end when Manuel purchased the marsh owned by John Perez. Leander and Manuel agreed to stop all legal action and allow members of the St. Bernard Trappers Association to access the property.

The purchase price for the 100,000 acres was \$800,000. Manuel mortgaged everything that he owned to raise sufficient funding to close the deal. He went deeply into debt and sold the property to the trappers as a public service. Some trappers purchased, some leased and some trespassed. Not all of the Islenos were happy with the outcome, but at least they could earn a living without being harassed, arrested or shot.

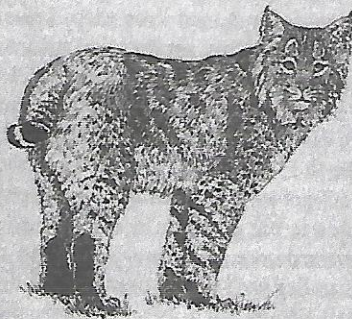
If readers would like to learn more about the Trappers' War, I recommend the three sources that I referenced to write this article. The first is "The Delacroix Islenos and the Trappers' War in St. Bernard Parish" by Bryan Gowland. The second is "Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta" by Glen Jeansonne. The last is a documentary made about the war called "Delta Justice: The Islenos Trappers' War" by David Dubose. The documentary's trailer can be viewed online at [Vimeo.com](http://Vimeo.com).



Trappers crowd around a fur buyer as he talks prices. The sale was on the porch of the community store in St. Bernard.

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