

**Top Ten Essays
1985
Louisiana History
Essay Contest**



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TOP-TEN ESSAYISTS

- 1st Mia Leigh Phenice, Hathaway High School, Hathaway**
- 2nd Ksenija Gagic, Sacred Heart School, Moreauville**
- 3rd Tina Leigh Spears, Cedar Creek School, Ruston**
- 4th Holly Schexnayder, St. Catherine of Siena School, Metairie**
- 5th Billy Sellers, Amy Bradford Ware School, Opelousas**
- 6th Janice Hu, Southeastern Louisiana University Lab School, Hammond**
- 7th Leah Jeanime Johnson, Ville Platte High School, Ville Platte**
- 8th Doug Thorpe, University High School, Baton Rouge**
- 9th Fara J. Fontenot, St. Margaret's School, Lake Charles**
- 10th William Edward Jones, Jesus the Good Shepherd School, Monroe**

My Mother's Family

by Billy Sellers

*Amy Bradford Ware School
Opelousas, Louisiana*

My name is William Paul Sellers. I was born on April 14, 1972, at Opelousas General Hospital in Opelousas, Louisiana. I am the second son of Walton Preston Sellers, Jr. and Mildred Damerou Sellers. My mother, also called "Millie," is the daughter of Paul Johan Damerou and Isabel Maria Vincensini Damerou. My mother's father was born in Germany, near the city of Kiel, in Schleswig-Holstein Province. At the young age of 18 years, he came to the United States and became a United States citizen. My grandmother, Isabel, was a school teacher in the Republic of Panama, where my mother was born on September 22, 1936.

My grandmother's parents were Aquiles Vincensini and Isabel Maria Vasquez. My great-grandfather, Aquiles Vincensini, was one of the original civil engineers who travelled with Ferdinand De Lesseps of France with the French group who attempted to build the first canal in the Republic of Panama. My great-grandfather remained in Panama after the French were unsuccessful in building the canal due to many deaths from yellow fever and malaria. He established his residence in this new country and married Isabel Maria Valsquez, a Spanish lady and the daughter of Elias Vasquez and Juliana Rivera Vasquez. They set up their home on a plantation in the interior of Panama at Anton, where they raised cattle and grew coffee and bananas. They raised a family of four girls, Ninetta, Luz Maria, Tulia and Isabel, my grandmother. Aquiles' ancestors, the Renieri family, were prominent Corsicans, living in Ajaccio. Corsica is an island between France and Italy (first governed by the Italians, later the French). This family (the Renieri's) were known for the quality of their grapes and the wines they produced.

My grandfather's (Paul Damerou's) parents were Otto Damerou and Anna Gnutzman Damerou. Otto was the son of Johan Damerou and Wilhemina Blahr. Anna Gnutzman was born in Norway and was the daughter of Jochim Gnutzman and Anna Hingst. My grandfather was one of five children. His ancestors were Nordic people who lived around the Baltic Sea in northern Germany. They were primarily farmers who grew oats, barley and wheat. They did everything for themselves, raising their own food and living in homes where they had their own ovens to bake home-made bread and a smokeroom to smoke their fish, meats, and poultry. They also lived in close harmony with the ocean and some family members were seamen.

My grandfather, Paul Damerou, as a young man was a very strong, sturdy individual. He served in the United States Army in the late 1920s and after becoming a citizen and serving his military duty, he *walked* from Brownsville, Texas, to Panama (where he had been stationed in the military) during the Depression. People were very poor then and he could not afford to travel like everyone else. Once in Panama, he married my grandmother, Isabel Vincensini. They had two daughters--Mildred, my mother, and Eileen. My aunt Eileen lives with her family in Portland, Oregon. My mother studied to be a concert pianist when she was younger. She also knows four languages--English, Spanish, French and a little German. She has worked for the United States government and for several lawyers in Opelousas. She now works for the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries in Opelousas. She is a very intelligent woman. My mother also worked for the Town of Washington, Louisiana, as Town Clerk, Treasurer, and Clerk of the Mayor's Court. In addition, she helped maintain the books for the Natural Gas System of the Town of Washington. While she worked in the Canal Zone, my mother served as translator in the military courts and had the occasion to meet many famous people of many different countries. She once met former President Richard Nixon and his wife, Pat. She also got to see, in person, former President Eisenhower and Mamie, and the Queen of England, Elizabeth, and Prince Phillip. She also was fortunate to meet many people of the entertainment world, including Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, and

John Wayne. (Wayne was once married to a lady from Panama, whose family was well known to my mother's family.)

My grandfather, Paul Damerau, tells me about his childhood often, and how he was raised by an uncle because his parents died when he was a very young boy. His uncle was a blacksmith and a very sturdy Prussian who believed in strict discipline. This man, however, taught him the basics of blacksmithing and carpentry. My grandfather very often remembers the winters in Germany and how cold they were and how their quilts were made out of goose down and goose feathers which were very, very warm. My grandfather went to school in wooden shoes in those days, but he speaks very highly of the education that he received in those schools and how excellent they were. He became a carpenter by trade and has tried to hand this down to anyone who wants to make use of it.

My grandmother, Isabel, was a school teacher in the Republic of Panama. As a young girl, she learned English and after she graduated from a state-run school for young ladies, she became a teacher and taught English to the children of her country. She came to the United States to further her education and spent two years in Florida where she attended Pensacola College.

As a young girl, my mother lived in the Republic of Panama. She tells me about the Spanish way of life there where chaperones were very important. They were called *dueñas*. She was very much involved in the American and Panamanian schools, taking part, in English and Spanish, in many plays, concerts and artistic events. She enjoys telling me about the beautiful music of her native land and also the interesting Indian tribes that inhabit the country. Once, when my grandfather was ill in the jungles, they took him in and nursed him back to health. One of the most interesting tribes of Indians are the San Blas Indians. They live in the islands off the east coast of Panama. They use coconuts as money exchange and are trying to keep their old culture and customs alive. They do not mind visitors, but they resent any changes which the government or tourists try to force on them.

My mother and father met in Panama in 1955. They were both attending the Canal Zone College there. My father's father was attached to the United States Embassy and he, my father, to Panama to meet his family after getting out of the U. S. Army. My parents were married a year after they met, in October, 1956. They came to the United States two years later and established their home in the historic town of Washington, Louisiana. I have an older brother, Walton Sellers, III, who attends LSU Graduate School in Baton Rouge.

I would like to say that I am very proud to have come from a branch of my family that is rather old and filled with many personal and public achievements. I hope that I can continue to maintain this tradition and pass it on to my own children.

Of all of my mother's ancestors, I have enjoyed hearing about my grandfather, Paul Damerau's adventures the most. I have known him all my life and feel much closer to him than the other ancestors whom I did not get to meet.