

## Perez, Alfred



### Miniature Boat Carver

Most of Alfred Perez's life was spent along the waterways of southeastern Louisiana, and the miniature fishing boats that he crafted reflect his traditional Isleño upbringing. The Isleño arrived in Louisiana in the late eighteenth century, when Spain established a community of colonists from the Canary Islands in St. Bernard Parish. Most Isleños have continued to live close to the land, hunting for alligators, ducks, shrimping, crabbing, trapping muskrat, and gathering Spanish moss. Over many generations, they have maintained their distinctive form of the Spanish language and culture.

Alfred Perez was born in 1921 in a Spanish-speaking community, which is present day Delacroix Island, in St. Bernard Parish. Mr. Perez traced his Isleños heritage back many generations on both sides of his family. His paternal great-grandfather came to Louisiana from the Canary Islands, and his mother's family has been in Louisiana since the eighteenth century.

His father, Casimire Perez, made his living fishing and trapping. He also composed and performed the traditional story-songs called *décimas*. Each November through February the family moved to a trapping camp to trap muskrats. Although natural resources were plentiful, making a living was often difficult during the Depression years. Mr. Perez remembered selling muskrats for only 17 cents each and shrimp for as little as \$2.75 a barrel. Families had little money for luxuries and the children had to be creative and make their own toys. Alfred Perez began making small wooden boats as a boy, as well as toy trucks and wagons, fashioning their wheels from bottle caps or sawed-off broomsticks. He was dedicated to preserving his language, which resembles the Castilian Spanish spoken in the eighteenth century. Like many Isleños of his generation, Mr. Perez knew no English when he started school and he recalled being punished by teachers for speaking his native language. He considered Spanish his first language, but many younger Isleños have grown up speaking only English.

Mr. Perez, who left Delacroix Island when he entered the military service during World War II, retired and lives in Poydras with his wife Daisy. Over the years, he occasionally made miniature boats like those he created as a boy as gifts for his grandchildren. In 1984, he began building the carefully crafted and detailed replicas he was now known for building. He recreates the graceful wooden boats he grew up with: oyster luggers, Biloxi double-rigged shrimp boats, and Louisiana luggers, which are also called canots. He used primarily balsa wood and tupelo, and his cabins are made of plywood paneling. The largest of his models measures 18 inches in length.

Proud of his Isleños heritage, Alfred Perez traveled extensively throughout Louisiana and the United States to educate others about his culture. He participated in festivals throughout Louisiana

demonstrating his model boat making and telling stories. He frequently took part in school programs in St. Bernard and Orleans Parishes. He passed away October 5, 2012.