

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Jimmie Lee Williams Riggs

COLLECTION: 4700.2616

IDENTIFICATION: born and raised in Mossville, Louisiana

INTERVIEWER: Chelsea Arseneault

SERIES: Mossville History Project – Field Interviews

INTERVIEW DATES: April 15, 2016

FOCUS DATES: 1930s-1970s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4570

Introduction; Riggs born November 28, 1936 at home in Mossville; mother sent her two brothers to get the midwife, and they stopped by the sugarcane factory on the way; born west of the Kansas City Southern Railroad Track, across from the Masonic Hall; memories of childhood home; father built houses, was a carpenter by profession; lived in the center of Mossville; residents with cars would take others grocery shopping; remembers Earthy Prater, who took a wagon to “make groceries”; ministers from the different churches rotated, which contributed to the closeness of the community; Mossville was a black settlement; her father born in the area, on the “new” Highway 90, but her mother born in Mossville; mother’s name Anna Garrett McNiel; her father was born in State Line, Mississippi on his father's plantation; he went from the plantation to the normal college for colored in Baton Rouge; he was the first teacher in Mossville, Berkeley C. Garrett; paid thirty-five dollars a month; gave an acre of land for the first school; Riggs reads information from a dissertation; location of the first school; he was a landowner; died in 1935, at seventy-five years old; don’t know much about his origins or parents’ names; divorced his first wife; second wife Belle Smith, and she died in 1919; from the Franklin area; family moved to Houston and part of the family buried there; mother said the Smith family came from up north, but were not Creole; discusses her father, James Williams’s, side in more detail; his father Julius Williams; minister with the Sanctified Church; doesn’t know much about the origins of that side of the family; her mother previously married to a Rigmaiden, who died early; had two sons from that marriage, Rudolph and Curtis; her father raised her brothers; interconnectedness of the families; mother’s brother Ira Garrett married a Rigmaiden; mother ran Purdy’s drug store, located in Bel Air; geographic boundaries of Mossville; Sulphur annexed Mossville; different areas of Mossville; northern section called Saprack; families who lived there; Bel Air subdivision came in the ‘50s; Queensboro another subdivision; memories of the Kansas City Southern Railroad; emphasizes that Mossville not a country town; people did not farm, but did have gardens; memories of childhood garden and canning; most people put their canned goods in a “safe”, which was really a small cupboard; ladies would exchange goods; mother’s brother Ira Garrett owned a store in Mossville; details of that side of the family; Ira the

man of the town; he was one of the people who had a car; sold barbeque, then operated a large store right by the railroad track; description of the store; Ira's house on the side of it; everything kept behind the counter; people could get food on credit; growing up, she spent most of her time there, eating cheese; recalls his credit books and the double receipts; to others, he may have seemed like a rough person, but he was a businessman; he was a steward in the Methodist church; baseball field on the back of his property; Saturdays and Sundays the men played baseball, that was a thing black people did; the young men formed a team, and would play in different towns; baseball games a community event; Garrett's store probably closed in the '70s, because he was getting old; Riggs' son Jeffery Williams speaks; memories of Mr. Rougeau and his store; no memories of racial tension in Mossville; she integrated McNeese in 1955; other community leaders and their contributions; Ms. Martill's canteen; she went to high school in Arkansas; several clubs in the area, but she didn't really go; Joy Hill, The Wagon Wheel, and Valery's; church events; pew rallies and penny marches; she was a queen at a penny march; continues describing church events, like a cake walk; older people participated in what was called a box supper; she went to elementary school at the old school, not sure if it was a Rosenwald school or not; description of the old school; not sure when that school closed, because in '52 she went to Arkansas for high school; high school and bussing options for children in Mossville; elementary school teachers; description of the classes; teachers very strict; Ms. Washington her favorite teacher; teachers would board with different community members, and became part of the community that way; childhood games like hopscotch and checkers; fond memories of the end of the year play and the May Pole; best friends; recalls electricity and plumbing; getting propane tanks refilled and using wood stoves; ice used to be delivered; listening to boxing matches on the radio; attended Langston High School in Hot Springs, Arkansas; adjusting to high school, enjoyed it; shocked by snow; brothers both in the service at this time; joined air force, different duty stations; stationed together for a year; doesn't remember their jobs in the air force; jobs after the military—both used G.I. Bill; Curtis also became a minister; died young, but Rudolph lived to his eighties; uncle B.C. Garrett Junior fought with Buffalo Soldiers, the black cavalry that went west; card from the president saying they arrived at Fort Rucker; he was a minister and lived in Mossville; went on to Fort Huachuca; Congress now recognizing service of the Buffalo Soldiers; recalls rationing stamps to get gas; each child had a stamp for two pair of shoes a year; father worked for the Port of Lake Charles, and was mad at getting paid with a gold piece; mother crocheted and knitted, but was not a seamstress; lady in Mossville who made dresses; shopping from a catalog; segregated restaurant; protesting at McNeese; NAACP helped them avoid arrest; integration in Mossville; majoring in physical education at McNeese, married and moved to Houston before finishing; memorable teachers at McNeese; many organizations closed to black students at that time; attended a meeting for P.E. majors, but told it was "invitation only"; saw Dr. King at a rally in Houston; not afraid to travel after his assassination; devastation of President Kennedy's assassination; movie theaters in the area; Mossville not really a Creole community—no one spoke it, and she learned about zydeco only as an adult; different dances; courting and dating; you were expected to show adults respect; family discipline; felt grown up senior year of high school; chores growing up; important skill was learning to make coffee; traveling salesman sold coffee; mother would sometimes roast and grind her own beans; different grinder for the meat; local butchers; mother's recipes; had a pecan tree, and she liked to make pecan candy for holidays; their job was to peel the pecans; used to sell pecans with her brothers; spent their earnings at Uncle Ira's store; different industries in the area; people who worked in the plants seemed to have a better life; many women were

homemakers; didn't really think about pollution growing up; doesn't remember any explosions from the plants, but does remember some fires; her father a carpenter, and never worked in the plants; teased him about his house in Lake Charles; memories of hurricanes; spent the night at the school during Hurricane Audrey; medical treatment in the area; different churches the family attended; church leaders; further details about rotating ministers; tent revivals; the Holiness Church had healings; favorite hymns; grandfather B.C. [Berkley C. Garrett] may have had a will call for the mail; encampment owned by the Baptist church supposed to be haunted; memories of voter registration; briefly discuss Gerald Washington's death; fondest memories of Mossville; if it's there or not, Mossville will always be her home; closing.

TAPES: 1 (T4570)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 2 hours, 52 minutes

#PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 161 pages

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: Seven photographs taken during interview at the Imperial Calcasieu Museum in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Photographer Kyle Tanglao.

OTHER MATERIALS: Correspondence

RESTRICTIONS: none