

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: LaSalle Williams

COLLECTION: 4700.2600

IDENTIFICATION: LaSalle Williams lived most of his life in Mossville, Louisiana. He worked in education for forty-two years – twenty as a coach and twenty-two as a principal. After retiring, he worked at the sheriff's department. An important community leader, he served on the Calcasieu Parish Planning and Zoning Board and was president of the Calcasieu Parish branch of the NAACP for thirty years. Coach Williams Drive in Mossville is named after him.

INTERVIEWERS: Stephanie Dragoon

SERIES: Mossville History Project - Field Interviews

INTERVIEW DATES: December 7, 2015

FOCUS DATES: 1930s-1980s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4551

Father owned wood yard and farmed six acres; sold mostly oak and hickory to white people with fireplaces; Williams came to Mossville when he was about six years old; crops his father grew; schooling in Mossville went to sixth grade; segregated white-only Westlake school went to ninth, and later to twelfth; most Mossville kids went to work after graduating from sixth grade; parents wanted Williams to have high school education so they drove him and his siblings to Lake Charles; went first to Second Ward and later to W.O. Boston High School in Lake Charles; bus transportation between Mossville and Lake Charles; set top record for 100-yard dash in Lake Charles; being a star athlete gave him special privileges; offered scholarships to both Grambling and Wiley College; planned to go to Wiley but got drafted in 1952 during Korean conflict; training in demolition and heavy equipment; married while in military and decided to make it his career; mother insisted he leave military and go to college; went to Grambling for a year, then recruited to run track at McNeese on legislation scholarship; got head coaching job at Mossville High School his first year out of college; during segregation, bussed right past white high school to reach black school; transferred to Westlake as assistant coach when the high school finally integrated; powers-that-be made excuses for why he wasn't promoted to head coach; he got his master's degree and a plus thirty; offered principal job at Mossville middle school; when enrollment so low that Mossville school closed, he became principal at Lake Charles Boston; retired after forty-two years in education: twenty as a coach, twenty-two as principal; played a lot of golf after retirement; got hired part time to work for sheriff's department; started with twelve-hour shifts in the jail; saw many former students in jail; tried to quit after race fight, sheriff's department wouldn't let him go; transferred to trustee area at the correctional center in Lake Charles, where he worked for five years; has spent last seven years as guard at main gate; wants

to work there three more years, then retire; when he worked in schools, couldn't pay into Social Security so he's lacking desired benefits; Williams' health has been good, but his wife has needed multiple surgeries; they had four children; adopted their goddaughter's baby and raised her; sent her to college, but she fell in love and got pregnant, didn't finish; now she's married with three kids; Williams' house destroyed in Hurricane Rita; family separation during Rita; now they're raising two of the godchild's grandchildren; helped godchild's daughter's husband get job at Sasol and education at welding school; Williams never knew his biological father; Williams family had raised his biological mother, her brother and sister; his adopted mother had no biological children of her own, but was always caring for somebody; adopted mother worked for restaurant-owning family in Lake Charles; stole his mom's car one afternoon and taught himself to drive; mother frequently disciplined him by whipping; explains dynamite holes; father whipped him only once, for swimming in dynamite hole against his orders; father would have to stop mother's whippings, because she didn't know when to stop; now appreciates her discipline because he's stayed out of trouble his whole life; worst whipping he ever got was for stealing a neighbor's chickens; habits and origins of adopted parents; family came to Mossville area to sharecrop; description of sawmills; businesses in Mossville; passenger train in Mossville; only three chemical plants when he was growing up; all his uncles worked in plants; children's careers; middle son had two heart attacks, now lives with parents and helps around house and yard; names of his children; Williams worked on school breaks to earn his own money; courting his wife; mother sewed some of his clothes; quilting; when he got older, he bought all his clothes on credit; married at age twenty, his wife was eighteen; as chemical plants increased, all the wild fruit trees died; no EPA, plants did whatever they wanted; destruction of Bayou D'Inde; plants pumped waste into river at night; now there are regulations on plants; people didn't complain about pollution because they valued their plant jobs; grew up Methodist but switched to Baptist; worked in recreation for thirty-plus years, whenever school was out; mistakes in retirement planning; turned down job offer in Philadelphia because students were undisciplined; wife didn't like snow up north; description of road system when he was young; logging in area; subdivisions built in 1980s; block voting in Mossville; as a teenager, politicians paid Williams to drive voters to poll; Williams' political involvement; lost election for police jury by only thirty-four votes; serves on Calcasieu Parish Planning and Zoning Board; thwarted bid for Westlake Parliament chemical plant to expand across road in Vincent Settlement; "man camp" being built near Williams to house Sasol workers; Williams still lives in Mossville because Sasol has not offered him enough money to buy him out; Sasol tried to move him to nice house in Vincent Settlement but too much traffic and too many plants; has requested one million dollars from Sasol; sheriff and DA were biggest political races in Mossville because they were local people you dealt with regularly; Williams served as NAACP president for Calcasieu Parish for thirty years; NAACP sued chemical plants for unequal treatment of black workers; fought for black children to get new textbooks, rather than hand-me-downs from white schools; sit-ins, separate drinking fountains and waiting areas; Westlake High School greeted black students on first day of integration with ropes to simulate lynchings; racial fights in boys' restroom at Westlake High; Mossville alums stuck together to protect blacks from whites at Westlake; integration partially motivated by Westlake wanting superior black athletes on its sports teams; Westlake had to get a stronger principal to deal with integration; as an educator, Williams gave blacks and whites equal treatment, including paddling their behinds; Williams was raised to respect all people, no matter what color; picketed Daigle family's grocery store because they sold inferior and tainted products to black customers; store shut down; only three churches in Mossville when he was

growing up; churches used to support each other; Hal McMillin was instrumental in getting street named after Williams; involvement with Boy Scouts; coach who inspired him to become a coach; would do it all over again, glad to have had the opportunity to guide many young men; uncle also inspired him by teaching him many things, including how to play baseball; values how the community of Mossville shared what they had; having bonfires when old people were sick; wakes held at home; young people today don't understand struggles to attain integration; his adopted daughter doesn't understand the word "budget" or concept of sacrifice to get ahead.

TAPES: 1 (T4551)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 2 hours

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 56 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Biographical data form; Correspondence; Biographical commemorative card titled "Honoring a Community Champion: LaSalle "Coach" Williams

RESTRICTIONS: none