

**T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection**

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Earnest Freeman

**COLLECTION:** 4700.2504

**IDENTIFICATION:** Raymond, Mississippi, native; longtime Louisiana Cooperative Extension agent in Avoyelles Parish

**INTERVIEWER:** Chelsea Arseneault

**SERIES:** History of Louisiana Cooperative Extension Services

**INTERVIEW DATES:** Session I: March 4, 2015  
Session II: March 23, 2015  
Session III: March 24, 2015

**FOCUS DATES:** Session I: 1951-2000  
Session II: 1960-2000  
Session III: 1951-2005

**ABSTRACT:**

**Session I**  
**Tape 4422**

Introduction; Freeman born and raised in Raymond, Mississippi; lived on a farm which provided a good living for his family; his three children were raised in Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, his children's educations and occupations; parents Johnny Freeman and Theresa Caston Freeman, mother passed away when he was a teen; description of Raymond, Mississippi; he started in a two-room schoolhouse but later attended a new modernized school; spent a lot of time outdoors as a child; plowing fields on the family farm by hand, other chores on the farm, it instilled a good work ethic; he and his siblings switched off on chores, made sure everything got done; he loved school and participating in Future Farmers of America (FFA); attending state competitions at Louisiana State University (LSU); various types of competition at FFA events, for example, identifying meat cuts and quality; differences in educational opportunities for his parents, himself, and his children; he's very proud of his children's accomplishments; he learned many practical skills from his agriculture teachers and classroom instruction; agriculture was a focus for him, he found it fun; deciding on a career path in college; job possibilities after college; went into the air force after graduating because he wanted military experience; spent four years on temporary duty assignments, helping to set up field hospitals, working as a veterinary specialist, and on quality assurance for food deliveries and preparation on base; specifics of food quality inspections; had an opportunity to continue service in Ireland, but decided to leave military and work in agriculture; interviewing for various positions before leaving the service; met with district agent at LSU who told him about a position that would soon be open in Avoyelles Parish;

left service in May 1980 and immediately started with LSU Ag Center; was familiar with cooperative extension through TV show *Green Acres* and the county agent character, Mr. Kimball; Freeman attended Hinds Junior College which they had a research farm; he got more acquainted with agriculture during his college years and gained a lot of knowledge; transferred to Alcorn State University and got similar hands-on agricultural experience; education came in handy when he was later working with farmers; 4-H agents are generally younger because they work with the children in 4-H programs, they also work closely with county agents; agents have to know their stuff when they work with farmers; agents' job is to take information from research stations and specialists and disseminate it to farmers and citizens; holding informational meetings on specific topics and crops; when working alongside farmers on their farms and having them test LSU-recommended methods, they call the process verification; verification works great to show farmers new methods in action; memories of school desegregation in Mississippi, he attended Hinds County Agricultural High School, did not attend Raymond High School because it was segregated at the time; some of his younger siblings attended Raymond High after desegregation, feels that sports and clubs brought students together despite their race; in college, he was one of a small group of black students on campus; working summers in Jackson, Mississippi, gave him exposure to whites and blacks working together; other instances of friendships and professional relationships without regard for skin color; participating in a college production of "A Raisin in the Sun" which was very well-attended my majority white student body; people find common ground through common interests; feeling welcomed as a new county agent in Avoyelles, people knew him from a newspaper article and greeted him everywhere he went; he served a population of forty-three thousand, starting as an assistant county agent; others agents working in the parish when he started in 1980; he started working with small farms on "general everything" whether crops or cattle; explains process of grafting on a pecan tree, holding demonstrations on grafting, pruning, fertilizing, and gardening; advisory committees worked with citizens to determine what was needed from agents; chancellor of the ag center, William Richardson, challenged him to raise funds for an improved building; first step was forming an advisory committee of around forty people representative of the parish; people who assisted as the project moved forward, including president of the police jury who pledged \$50,000; meeting with Allen Canning Company led to a ceremony where they also donated \$50,000; other business support within the parish, getting additional funding through grants; advisory committee began planning for improved extension office and a museum; Allison Lemoine with police jury had idea to combine goals of improved office, museum, and community meeting area, this made the plan more appealing to Senator Donald Hines as he sought funding from the legislature; granted funding after almost four years of trying; everyone understood the importance of the project; some conflict over where the museum should be located, most agreed it had to be in a well-travelled area along Highway 1; land along that corridor was expensive, he placed an ad looking for people to donate land; a man who owned a Firestone business in Mansura, Louisiana, stepped up and donated the land in exchange for a tax credit; ended up with eight acres of land for the museum and grounds; helping to fund the museum is his greatest achievement, along with raising his children; his son has won awards in public speaking and social studies at state-wide competitions, was grand marshal in a parade; events seemed to align to allow funding of 4-H museum; Senator Hines was instrumental, was a great senator; 4-H started in Avoyelles Parish at Moreauville High School in 1908, there's a sign that commemorates that; being an extension agent has been a great career; in final months of his career, he worked alone in the huge evacuation center at the Dean Lee Research Station; he is

proud of his career, loved working with people; was nice to start working on smaller farms and grow into larger farms; the job required meeting people when it where it was convenient for them, including at night after normal business hours; working long days was a part of extension; he worked on a weekly publication called "Ag Notes" and wrote on topics like gardening and landscaping, his colleagues contributed columns on other topics of interest to citizens of the parish; discusses an award he received related to a new variety of sweet potato, the previous variety had greatly decreased in production and farmers were losing money; farmers heard about new variety and wanted to try it as soon as possible, so research was fast-tracked; new variety tasted better and had all the same nutrients; sweet potato research station in North Louisiana is constantly doing research; new variety is known as Beauregard; process of verification on farms where several acres are put aside to plant according to LSU recommendations, farmers love it and get to keep the crop while LSU collects data; farmers must tend fields themselves, but are told to follow recommendations on what to do and when, and a specialist visits every week; example that a farmer may let weeds grow to a certain height before treating, LSU research might indicate otherwise, and their recommendations are proven by research; conclusion.

## **Session II**

### **Tape 4423**

Introduction; interviewer ask Freeman to tell story about Canadaville that was not caught on tape in the last session; Canadaville was also known as Magnaville; Magna is an auto parts company based in Canada; company owner Frank Stronach saw the devastation in New Orleans on TV after Hurricane Katrina, wanted to help; Stronach sent Dennis Mills to New Orleans to pick people up and bring them to Palm Beach, Florida; two hundred and sixty people were taken out by bus; evacuees were embraced by Pam Beach citizens who helped them with clothing, food, and getting jobs; after several months, Stronach had to relocate them; Avoyelles Parish chosen because it was safe from hurricanes; Stronach contracted a company to build mobile homes, gave them until Christmas to complete the building, so they worked in shifts twenty-four hours per day; initial proposed location for community was Hamburg, Louisiana, but that plan changed for various reasons; settled on Simmesport, Louisiana; community planning was very important to Stronach, he didn't want a trailer park; Stronach brought a team down from Canada to meet with local government and ask that the paperwork be fast-tracked; Freeman was selected to fly back to Canada with the team and assist in community planning because of his agriculture experience; Freeman worked with architects, electricians, plumbers to plan the community; Stronach shared his opinions, wanted a community garden; plan was ready to present to parish leaders in under a week; mobile homes initially set up in the Bay Hills area, moved to Simmesport after several weeks; large ceremony held to celebrate the beginning of the community; residents worked and went to school, were encouraged to pursue vo-tech education; instructors would come to town, give lessons in the morning and have residents work hands-on in the afternoon, on building a fence for example; Canadaville got a lot of press, Stronach was always questioned about why he built the community, said "I can throw a lifeline if I want to"; Freeman worked with a specialist from LSU to teach residents rural ways of life: raising animals, gardening, growing fruit trees; used crawfish and other seafood waste as fertilizer, taught methods for composting; some community members embraced the new knowledge; all community members had to work or contribute somehow because they were living rent-free for five years; some community members wanted to learn how to farm commercially, Freeman helped them with soybean and corn crops; residents moved back to New Orleans or to other southern cities when the project ended after

five years; businesses had been developing around the port in Simmesport near Canadaville; Stronach floated the idea of the 4-H museum being built in Simmesport, but it was too far off to one side of the parish; other options floated for where to locate the museum because land along Highway 1 was so expensive, but owner of a Firestone business in Mansura, Louisiana, came through with a donation of land; took four years to get funding for the museum, he had good advice along the way and support from fellow staff; got to meet many of Canadaville residents, often held classes for them on small business, recordkeeping, gardening, etc.; residents could take other classes at local vo-tech school; age range of residents was people in their twenties up to senior citizens; some mobile homes were handicap accessible; there were also children who attended school locally; Freeman can't imagine how Magna staff managed the evacuation from New Orleans to avoid a stampede; many people were in New Orleans offering rides or relocation to other cities; recalls the first meeting about the project and how interesting it was; he visited Canada several times to give reports on the community, sometimes met with Stronach who was an "interesting fellow"; Stronach wanted minorities to learn to become managers in his company, so he set up a management school, reached out to the underprivileged in other ways; Stronach promised the residents five years, he called it a "hand-up", began preparing them after four years that the project was coming to an end; Shane Carmichael served as the project manager in Canadaville, he was there to liaison between residents and Magna; residents shared stories about their rescue after Hurricane Katrina, some did not have the means to leave the city, hoped the storm would not be severe; some residents were happy to leave bad neighborhoods in New Orleans, others loved the city and missed it; Katrina was a blessing in disguise for some people, allowed them an opportunity to get out of bad situations; Stronach wanted farming and gardening in Canadaville to be organic, wanted free-range chicken and hormone-free beef and pork; Stronach was an out-of-the-box thinker, started his own company from nothing; his company buys cars from every manufacturer and takes them apart to see how they work, they do research that way instead of stealing ideas; LSU and Southern University were able to provide specialists in organic farming; county agents' job is to disseminate information to farmers and citizens, residents of Canadaville often came to them with questions; some residents sold produce on a small scale; the community garden supplied enough for those who worked in it, and for other residents; all residents had to put in fifteen hours per week volunteering in the community; there were initial concerns about residents due to stereotypes, they had to prove themselves; community had a police force; proposed project for an evacuation center in Simmesport never got off the ground; land was set aside and a recreation area was built, but the building itself never came to fruition; plans for what the evacuation/community center would have included; would be interesting to interview former residents of Canadaville; conclusion.

### **Session III**

#### **Tape 4424**

Introduction; role of cooperative extension in hurricane relief and preparedness; evacuees from Hurricane Katrina had the greatest need, people in Avoyelles Parish pitched in to help them; church ministries also assisted; Freeman's involvement with his Baptist church; he was raised Baptist and raised his children Baptist; brief recap of his education and military experience; he would attend church services on the base or at local churches; his church and pastor participated in the Civil Rights Movement; faith strengthened his resolve to care about people, that carried into his work with extension, assisting farmers and citizens; typical things that he and other agents would demonstrate, like insect control, pruning, and grafting; he's been involved with

home missions and foreign missions through his church; he travelled to Haiti after a hurricane to help build homes for people living in temporary shelters; process of building homes, making concrete; government of Haiti was corrupt, so to help residents, they had to have people on the ground; Haitian kids were happy to get t-shirts and candy; he was called upon by the president of his convention to go to Haiti in 2013 to build homes; he felt joy to be able to share what they had with the residents living in poor conditions; arriving in Haiti, noticing that the people seemed happy despite living conditions, they were enthusiastically praising God in church services; donating money to a woman who didn't have proper clothes for church; they held a ceremony every time they completed a home; the county was devastated but people still had hope; church groups helping people and supporting education because Haitian government was not reliable; upon returning to the United States, they act as ambassadors to raise funds to support children going to school in Haiti; his church sends people back every year; providing a meal for the whole community before they leave Haiti; accommodations and costs when attending mission trips, part of the cost goes towards building materials; his parents were involved in the church, they instilled him with religious lessons, a sense of giving back; importance of tithing; if he sees somebody in need, he will help; in Haiti, they would collect money so that people could eat; his parents taught him and his eleven siblings a good work ethic, they all had chores on the family farm; the whole community looked after each other; he never disrespected his elders; today, his daughter-in-law has a hard time teaching disrespectful students; farming technology has improved since he was young and they plowed by hand and did stick planting for sweet potatoes; in his work in the 1980s and '90s, he saw farmers planting manually and mechanically; mechanization led to a dramatic change and increased production, a better living for some farmers; young people seem to be leaving for careers rather than taking over family farms; farmers get to be their own bosses, have a good way of life, but face worries of insects, weeds, low production; benefit of crop insurance that will pay farmers the parish average if their crop under-produces, allows for some certainty in income; farming lifestyle is risky, "but some people wouldn't trade nothing for it"; farmers' salaries vary depending on the size of their farm and the crops they grow; sweet potato and sugarcane are labor-intensive crops but have potential to make a lot of money; good harvests and crop insurance allow farmers to prepare for bad years; most farmers pay into Social Security or have IRAs to ensure they can afford retirement; Freeman feels his greatest contribution has been working with people, offering training and resources, having classes for farmers on particular topics; connecting farmers with ag center resources and recommendations for their crops and with specialists from LSU was rewarding; enjoyed working with farmers on their farms; advent of digital cameras helped immensely to get information from the field to specialists; another high-point in his career is the 4-H museum and extension building; support and funding came from all angles to get the facility built; Senator Donald Hines instrumental in securing state funding for the 4-H museum; they felt tremendous support from those involved with 4-H; 4-H Achievement Day occurs in every parish for kids in fourth grade through high school; opportunity to have student contests and for schools to be competitive; winners have the opportunity to go to LSU to receive awards; example of recent winners who demonstrated artificial insemination of a cow; all 4-H participants keep record books of their activities; his children have taken part in cooking competitions through 4-H; cooperative extension provides grassroots leadership for residents no matter what they want to achieve; they generate research and agents get that research into the hands of residents through direct contact; cooperative extension would not exist without the support of the people; Dean Lee Research Station has field days where farmers are invited for hands-on learning and demonstrations; 4-H often helps

children and teens to determine their future careers, example of a student who focused on photography and went on to work for Southern University; his son, Gerald, was interested in computers and now works in IT; 4-H record books allow participants to see their own progress; they throw a banquet for 4-H kids every year in the parish and give out awards; kids love to see themselves in the local newspaper; conclusion.

**TAPES:** 3 (T4422, T4423, T4424)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** Total – 4 hours, 12 minutes  
Session I: 1 hour, 36minutes  
Session II: 1 hour, 10 minutes  
Session III: 1 hour, 26 minutes

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** Total – 168 pages  
Session I: 83 pages  
Session II: 38 pages  
Session III: 47 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Photos (141); Interview questions (1 pg); Follow-up questions (4 pgs); Correspondence (1 pg)

**RESTRICTIONS:** None