

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Delma and Christine Bennett

COLLECTION: 4700.2663

IDENTIFICATION: Mossville residents, activists

INTERVIEWER: Chelsea Arseneault

SERIES: Mossville History Project - Field Interviews

INTERVIEW DATES: May 12, 2016

FOCUS DATES: 1950s-1980s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4620

Introductions; names are Christine Delafosse Bennett and Delma Leroy Bennett; Christine born in Lake Charles, at Memorial Hospital, in 1953; Delma born in San Francisco in 1944; parents' names; Christine talks about what brought her family to Mossville; family originally from Kinder; father's first impressions of Mossville; lived off the land and helped each other; father a well-digger; dynamics of self-contained community; school and the struggles of integration; fighting the whole four years she was at Westlake High School; unfair to work up to what they had already earned at Mossville, so they began to march; feels she missed out on her high school education since they were fighting to become a part of the school; picketing a store in Mossville called Rougeau's; Christine accused of stealing thread from the store, so they picketed; called a black man who worked for Rougeau's "Uncle Tom", because they felt he did whatever the white people said; as a result of picketing, they got picked up by the police and put in jail; anger over not being given a choice, and having to follow along with what the whites said to do; recalls teachers at Mossville and Westlake High; says Mossville was predominantly black, and they didn't interact with too many white people; Christine grew up on Old Spanish Trail, and was within walking distance to Mossville's school; had "beautiful" teachers at Mossville who were like parents; teachers would spend time with parents, even have dinner with them; knew they had to speak to their elders when they passed them, or else their parents would get a phone call; difficulty adjusting to new home in Lake Charles, because it's not as neighborly; points out in Mossville they still fought with each other, but were always there for each other; rivalry between Lake Charles and Mossville, mostly over girls; community discipline; in Mossville, everyone had a nickname; father a janitor in the plants, raised thirteen children by working there and digging wells; father had a garden at the plant, this was before anyone knew the dangers of chemicals; her mother, like many Mossville mothers, was a homemaker; large families common; girls and boys shared similar chores; her family shared one bathroom, so her father made himself a bathroom in the woods; living off the land; fighting the plants since the beginning; plants bringing in jobs, but also health hazards; industry's undercover tactics to acquire land; white

people taking advantage of older, uneducated black people; jobs before the plants came; large lumber company in Lake Charles; Delma explains many were glad when the plants came, because of new jobs; explains community grew, but black people not given jobs like operator, but rather janitor; light-skinned black people hired before dark-skinned black people; took years before they realized dangers of pollution; unexplained sickness; started getting educated on what was happening in the 70s; “shelter in place” at school when there were leaks or emissions at the plant—had to close the windows and turn off the air conditioning; older people afraid of losing their jobs; “shelter in place” worked at the school because the school board sent out a message, but others didn’t get a warning; plants supplying jobs, but at the same time killing people; different plants emitted different odors; in the 60s, there was an explosion at Cities Service that broke windows in Lake Charles; plant workers may have been given protective gear, but were not educated on possible risks; many plants used asbestos as insulation; “everything was just a free fall”; Mossville encroached on with no respect, while Westlake benefited from the plants; access to waterway essential to plant, but often ships spilled oil with no consequences and people still fished the water; Delma explains how he spent time between California and with his grandmother in Lake Charles; met Christine at a beach in Lake Charles, and has been there ever since; traveling through industrial areas to get to school in Westlake unfair; can’t put a price on heritage and health; talk of pipelines in Texas and Louisiana meeting up; Mossville school sold for nine million, not for the building, but for the land; can have mineral rights for only ten years; nobody will help them fight; differences in how the plants treated white communities versus black communities; buyouts offered to Mossville on a volunteer basis, since the community located in “buffer zone”; desire to leave Mossville whole; potential complications with Road Home; fighting to get a health clinic in the 60s; nurses would come to the Masonic Hall to give shots; Mossville never incorporated, but initially there was no need for it until integration started; leaders in the community; original families; different politicians who canvassed the community; issues of donated land; opinions on why African-American communities get bought out; Vista spill and Bel Air neighborhood; Christine tried to see toxicologist in Chicago, but was refused because she was from Mossville; police juror Hal McMillin won’t say anything against industries; wonders why everyone is afraid to go against industry; side effects of the different chemicals; buy-outs in Bel Air a sham; white man who lived behind Conoco got a million for his property, but a man in the Bel Air neighborhood right across from Vista got quarter of a million; lawyers involved made millions; Delma speculates this a premeditated move by Sasol; thinks they’ll be needed later, so he’s holding onto his Mossville property; struggle to find legal representation; Debra Sullivan an expert on first buyouts in Bel Air; industry and Kansas City Railroad are working together; talk that the bridge over I-10 can’t get fixed because it has too much sediment from the plants; concern that increased traffic on the waterways may dredge contaminants; told to eat fish from area at your own risk; memories of the clubs in Mossville; Paradise, Joy Hill; remembers a fight at the Paradise Club; entertainment options in the town, importance of sports; Christine was a tomboy, and could outrun the boys; painful that the community wasn’t given more information on buyouts; attending segregated Catholic church; Christine slapped by the priest on the bus, because she didn’t like to be accused of stealing; Delma in San Francisco when Dr. King assassinated, but he remembers the racism he experienced as a high schooler in Lake Charles; drafted in 1965; recalls the bus ride to Fort Ord as being light-hearted, he saw it all as “a big joke”; impressed by drill sergeant Gentry, wanted to be like him; white soldiers earned rank faster than black soldiers; recalls basic training and A.I.T.; had to shine your boots in the military, but he knew how to do that from his shoe-shining

days in Lake Charles; at seven years old, he'd shine shoes on Broad Street, for fifteen cents a shine; recalls other sergeants he met in the service; explains he's always been an entrepreneur, discusses different business ventures; argues plant job will take ten years off your life, even though it pays well; doesn't like a note of any kind, would rather pay all his bills as a lump sum; first impression of Mossville was his wife, he didn't care about Mossville previously; remembers Mossville always had a good athletic department; some Mossville athletes, like Johnny Comeaux, played professional sports; he was from the predominately black Boulevard area of Lake Charles, so his wife is the only reason he ended up in Mossville; bought a home and raised his children there; comical stories about gardening and trying to raise a goat; story of how he met and courted his wife; didn't get involved with the Black Panther Party because he thought the Muslims had more to offer; argues the Black Panthers were similar to the Klu Klux Klan in their relationship to society, but appreciates how they showed courage; admires Martin Luther King because he used the law in his fight; greatest experience in his life has been Christianity; argues most of modern Christianity is a farce; inconsistencies between modern Christian practices and Biblical text; recalls local business and store owners, observing most of them were white; life in San Francisco during the '60s; end of interview.

TAPES: 1 (T4620)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 2 hours, 16 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT 92 pages

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: Three photographs taken during interview.
Photographer Kyle Tanglao.

OTHER MATERIALS: Interview questions (3 pgs); Correspondence

RESTRICTIONS: pending