

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAMES: George Braxton, Velma Carheel **COLLECTION:** 4700.2553

IDENTIFICATION: Mossville natives; Braxton worked in Conoco management for 40 years

INTERVIEWER: Stephanie Dragoon

SERIES: Mossville History Project - Field Interviews

INTERVIEW DATES: July 27, 2015; September 9, 2015

FOCUS DATES: 1950s-1970s

ABSTRACT:

Session I
Tape 4489

Memories of Old Spanish Trail; stories about gold involving the pirate Jean Lafitte, who is commemorated in Lake Charles' annual Contraband Days; neighbor who dug up yard looking for treasure; many favorite businesses and community spots were on Old Spanish Trail; school mascot, the pirates, named after Jean Lafitte; Contraband Days lasts two weeks every year, is very large festival; since Lafitte traded slaves, the festival is not so popular with African Americans; cousin on Old Spanish Trail supposedly found gold bars, left everything behind; story about stepfather's son finding buried gold nuggets, using them in slingshot on birds; local canal called "Stink Gully" because of runoff from plants; Braxton was in management at Conoco for almost forty years; family members in household while growing up; as child, none of his family members lived more than 300 yards away; subdivision was named after Braxton family; was related to most of the 2,000 people who lived in Mossville; family get together every week or so; church was important gathering place; great-grandfather Griffin Braxton, a former slave, founded Mount Zion Baptist Church in 1866; mostly family members attended Mount Zion; Griffin Braxton started other churches in the area, including Good Hope in Westlake and New Emmanuel in Lake Charles; memories of seeing ghosts at community leader Joshua Rigmaiden's funeral; he no longer believes in ghosts or spirits; Coach LaSalle Williams was important community leader; women served as deaconesses and choir members at Mount Zion; women held mission circles in their homes; Braxton learned how to make coffee serving church ladies when his mother hosted mission circle; mother's coffee serving technique of pre-heating china cups; short stint in Boy Scouts ended after another scout attempted to assault Braxton; started working at age fourteen; first formal job as a bellhop at Pelican Motel in Sulphur; earlier, pulled and straightened nails, cleaned used bricks for money; caught bullfrogs and sold legs to teacher; picking blackberries and mayhaws to sell on roadside; worked in the kitchen of the Chateau Charles; didn't need a car to get to work, easy to catch rides with others; Greyhound bus also took him to work in Lake Charles; Lake Charles city bus also came to Mossville; worked at the

Lakeview Restaurant, now Steamboat Bill's, as busboy; learned to cook while working in restaurants; learned to filet fish; only time he ever cooked with his mother was to learn her lemon meringue pie recipe; surprising hard-working mom with poorly cooked steak dinner; Citgo built area of Maplewood for Sulphur; Braxton's mother took over her husband's garbage collection business when he died; very unusual for a woman to own garbage business, many obstacles; after a few years, business taken over by city; mother's subsequent marriages, including one on her seventy-fifth birthday; maternal great-grandfather was Israel Towner, an influential man from Beauregard Parish; Israel Towner lost property due to failure to pay taxes; Braxton has tried to trace whereabouts of great-grandfather Griffon Braxton through slave records; mother's brothers were carpenters; father's brother Rogers Braxton was at one time oldest practicing barber in Louisiana; disliked the way his uncle cut his hair; one grandmother's father was white; maternal grandparents lived near railroad tracks and had reputation for feeding hoboes; maternal grandmother rode horse and buggy to Sulphur to do housework for sulphur miners; incident where maternal grandfather knocked a horse unconscious; incident where, as children, father and uncle provoked skunk into spraying their Sunday clothes; family fished every day; eating fish sandwiches with bones intact; mother loved to fish; incident where absent-minded uncle failed to tie safety rope and fell off church roof during carpentry job; taught himself to hunt after father died when Braxton was ten years old; his first kill was an inedible pregnant rabbit; kids played outside so much that grass wouldn't grow; kids explored in the woods; seeing first movie in color in mid 1960s; popularity of drive-in theaters; Midway and New Moon were drive-ins in Lake Charles; uncles Frederick and Johnny were so crazy about horses as children that they dreamed about them; aunt who rescued Uncle Johnny when he fell down well; aunt died very young of scarlet fever; Uncle Albert Braxton accidentally killed another young man in a fight when he was seventeen, fled to Houston; he was caught twenty-five years later, tried, and given a suspended sentence; names other uncles and aunt; many family members moved to California in mid 1960s looking for opportunity; other family members moved to Texas; grandmother taught him to whistle; making whistles from metal scraps found on railroad; grandmother was disciplinarian; grandmother devoted to Bible and frequently talked about the rapture; father's cousin Bud Lyons married a much older, religious woman; Bud mistook the first airplane he ever saw for an angel, jumped off the roof expecting to be raptured; Uncle Johnny remembered paying fifty cents to see rotten whale displayed on railroad flat car, probably in 1930s—"that was entertainment."

Session II

Tape 4524

Braxton's family moved to area in mid-1800s, founded Mount Zion Baptist Church in Mossville in 1866; Braxton does ancestry research; mother's side of family moved from Sugartown to Mossville around 1920s or 1930s; uncles who served in military; uncle's affectionate relationship with wife; hostile reactions towards Braxton's mother taking over garbage collection business after his father's death; mother formalized the business; her employees spoke well of her; unpleasant aspects of garbage collection; garbage business served white communities outside Mossville; accompanying his father on route, stopping for picnic lunch; foods he ate with his father, such as all-sausage and liverwurst; relegated to inferior back room of white-owned burger establishment; early awareness of segregation; hauling trash to dump; father's spinoff business of reclaiming metal, cotton, newspapers and other salvageable stuff from garbage; father had helpful white business associates, many of whom came to his funeral; competition for

his father's garbage collection business; rough financial times after father's death; first got indoor plumbing around 1966; getting government food commodities; mother kept happy atmosphere in house, despite being poor; ate well; gardening with his mother; mother made pine straw tea; using hand-operated washing machine and wringer; relatives treating a cut with spider webs and turpentine; other medicinal plants and treatments; polypore and sassafras tea; going to his friend's house to eat beans; Mister Joe, a faith healer, treated Braxton's friend's wart by spitting tobacco on his face; Carheel's baby brother successfully treated by faith healer for deformity under tongue; faith healer named Mother Divine; people who would drive others to do errands in exchange for a couple of bucks; washing clothes by stomping on them in a tub, line drying; transition from shallow well to electric-operated deep well after Hurricane Audrey; division of chores: girls did inside work, boys did outside work; Carheel hated cleaning china, polishing silverware and cleaning blinds; explanation of swept yards; many people raised hogs, but Braxton's family didn't; had a horse named Curly that was captured wild and was too mean to ride; also had chickens, dogs and ducks; Curly ate live chickens; picking pecans from uncle's tree; uncle doubted the truth of chicken-eating horse story; Curly eventually killed by lightning, sold to soap maker; extracurricular activities during school; horrible experience of having hole in his sock visible during dance performance of the mashed potatoes; still doesn't like to dance today; worked steadily from age fourteen until retirement; more on early odd jobs; often left alone as children; reprise of story about cooking steak dinner for his mother; children were much safer then; wife's name is Giselle; has two children, currently aged forty-five and thirty-seven; reprise of story of buying one hundred chickens from radio ad; was hoping to sell eggs, but they all were roosters; butchering chickens; as a girl, mother had to clean chicken hawks her father killed; once her mother found live baby snakes inside a chicken hawk; cleaning chickens, everybody knew how to clean fish and crab; vegetables, nuts and fruits grown in garden; no formal medical doctors in Mossville area when he was a child; closest doctor in Maplewood; family doctor was in Sulphur; Braxton recently learned he was born in Lake Charles, not in Sulphur like he'd always thought; his generation more apt to be born in hospitals than delivered by midwives; reprise of story about uncle who killed a man with ceramic jug when he was only seventeen, subsequently fled; doctor making house calls during father's terminal illness; family quarantined when Carheel thought to have diphtheria; wakes at people's houses; wakes of grandfather and grandmother; last wake in town was probably in 1973 for maternal grandmother; great number of grandmother's progeny; geographic boundaries of Mossville; positive reaction to ConocoPhillips plant being built in 1940s; environmental improvements in Mossville over the years; describes plant as "a necessary evil for the day and the society that we live in"; but must manage plants carefully; communication plan he devised during his management career at ConocoPhillips; responsibilities during emergencies at plant; memories of big 1985 explosion at Conoco; notifying relatives that he hadn't been killed in explosion; his work reducing fugitive emissions; advocated for caution light and speed limit reduction on Old Spanish Trail; mother raising them to have good self-discipline; mother was boss in the household; trying to take on a manly breadwinner role since his father died when he was so young; felt obligated to help provide for family, though mother never asked for a penny.

TAPES: 2 (4489, 4524)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 228 minutes
Tape 4489 (Session I) 107 minutes
Tape 4524 (Session II) 121 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 108 total
T4489 (Session I) 45 pages
T4524 (Session II) 63 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Interview questions (7 pgs); Correspondence

RESTRICTIONS: None