

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Enola Margaret LaTour-Pitre

COLLECTION: 4700.2584

IDENTIFICATION: LaTour-Pitre grew up in the historically African American town of Mossville, Louisiana. She moved away for forty years, then retired there in 2006.

INTERVIEWER: Stephanie Dragoon

SERIES: Mossville History Project - Field Interviews

INTERVIEW DATES: October 10 and November 23, 2015

FOCUS DATES: 1940s-1960s

ABSTRACT:

Session I

Tape 4532

Born in Lafayette, Louisiana, November 16, 1946; father was a bricklayer and cement finisher, mother did housekeeping; grandfather lived next door during her childhood; section of Old Spanish Trail renamed Burton; names of sister and three brothers; youngest brothers born ten and twelve years after Enola, so she helped raise them; parents moved to Mossville around 1945; post-war job boom in area; father worked in lumber yard and doing construction in 1940s and 1950s; father got Firestone job in 1956, from which he eventually retired; as a child, played in woods, picked blackberries, walked along railroad tracks; relations with aunt and uncle; chores; childhood games; sibling rivalry with older brother; still enjoys arguing with brother; parents were strict disciplinarians; spanking versus beating; mother was strict Catholic; attended church at Saint Peter Claver in Sulphur, later went to Saint John Bosco in Westlake; family games of softball in backyard; parents raised their children as a unified front; family had garden; raised rabbits, chickens, pigs as food, not pets; father had only fourth grade education but was very smart; father was illiterate, which bothered him; father was skilled at teaching his kids how to do jobs right; mother had graduated eighth grade; mother was very curious and interested in learning refined ways; parents had strong work ethic; mother so tidy the house reeked of Clorox; no indoor plumbing until sometime after 1956; father died in 2004, mother died in 2005; what vegetables they grew in the garden; families always shared vegetables and government commodities; still hates powdered milk; families also shared childcare duties; Mrs. Davis was a neighbor who kept an eye on everything and reported back to parents; Mrs. Davis was on their party line and caught them making prank calls; close friendship with cousin; father played accordion, mother taught the kids to dance; story of father learning to play accordion; father played house dances; splitting up of her dad's family when his mother died; father and siblings reestablished their relationship as adults; got piano from cousin in Houston; Enola took lessons

for five years but lacked passion for piano; youngest brother is a talented drummer; father's accordion style was more Cajun than zydeco; her dad and brother played in Raymond LaTour and the Sulphur Playboys; father played around Texas and Louisiana; he played New Orleans World Fair in 1984; mother's family were long-time landowners in Basile; paternal family were sharecroppers; more about grandparents; father was short, "small but mighty"; Enola's elementary education in Lake Charles, Westlake and Mossville; graduated from Mossville; went to McNeese for a year and a half before dropping out to marry Pete in 1966; day after wedding, moved to Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, where Pete was stationed; stayed in Ohio after his tour of duty; went back to school at Wright State in Ohio, got BS in chemistry in 1981; did weaponry research and development for Monsanto; finished master's degree program in 1985; relocated to Virginia; adopted two children while in Ohio; still enjoys taking classes; challenge of earning degree while raising two children, working fulltime and running a household; did research work in laboratories for about twenty years; at the Fells Research Institute, she studied the effects of weightlessness on dead monkeys for the space program; details of working in glove boxes examining purity of materials for Monsanto; dealing with radioactive materials; at Fells Research Institute, worked her way up from washing lab dishes; stayed home for a couple of years after adopting first child; worked at Monsanto for eight years; after moving to Virginia, worked for twenty years doing consulting work for environmental management; very briefly worked as realtor; she was the only family member to move away from Mossville area for most of her adult life; always wanted to return; after retiring, finally moved back to Louisiana in 2006; as a child, her parents and her maternal grandfather were her role models; paternal grandfather was always angry and frustrated because he was handicapped; mother was always quietly in control, demonstrated strength and wisdom; father believed in making your decision then accepting the consequences, not second-guessing; mother's self-assurance; mother's detachment about father's drinking; eventually father chose stable job at Firestone over musician's life; mother was in charge of finances; memories of school; her sister, Cecilia LaTour, arrives and joins the conversation; especially influenced by chemistry teacher, Miss Spikes; didn't love school; studious, but no extracurricular activities; benefits of all-black schools, including greater sense of respect and pride; since integration, many black kids haven't felt safe and comfortable; she finished school before integration; integration was a good idea that hasn't been executed well; Cecelia recalls getting hand-me-down textbooks from Westlake and Sulphur; Cecelia never experienced integrated education until college; black kids' fear during integration; they agree the materials they had weren't equal, but their facilities were nice in the all-black Mossville school; when they joined Saint John Bosco parish, the church was segregated; parents' attitudes toward integration; as teens, the two sisters decided to integrate church seating and sat in front row; when she moved to Ohio, people assumed she'd lived in a ghetto in Louisiana; difference between overt racism of the South and covert racism other places; she grew determined not to be intimidated by anybody; consciously cultivates attitude that this is her country because her people have been here for centuries; father grew up speaking only French; Cecelia remembers being teased by black kids for looking too white; if you know who you are, you don't have to prove anything; Creoles are both proud and humble; has only traced one of their ancestors into slavery; some relatives traced back to France and Italy; shock to father who thought his forebears came from Spain, not Italy; story of Marguerite, their great-great-grandmother, a slave who had four or five children with her owner; court case about whether the children would be freed after slave owner's death; what she knows about free people of color at time of Civil War; speculation about whether any of her relatives fought in Civil War; the sisters

don't remember black people having trouble voting in this area of Louisiana; Mossville citizens valued the vote; segregated burger joint across the street from McNeese that turned away Enola's business; called the "N" word when trying to go to Our Lady, Queen of Heaven Church; favored quieter ways of asserting their rights; trouble during integration in Westlake; Sulphur not welcoming but less confrontational; still feels like whites look askance at blacks in many places; Enola's mother extremely proud when MLK gained national attention; uncles who served in World War Two; their parents were probably attracted to area by plant jobs; remember being afraid of refineries because so many explosions; fear for loved ones working at factories when sirens went off; plants mostly offered manual labor jobs to minorities; some black men, such as their father, were lucky enough to learn a more skilled trade; plant and construction jobs most prevalent in Mossville; father was avid fisher and hunter; division of labor in household along gender lines; Dad's trick for cooking rice; father cooked fish and turtles; cooked without recipes; Cecelia is now the cook in the family; family cookouts; food brings the family together; Cecelia has big family.

Session II

Tape 4544

Population of Mossville expanded and contracted over the years; when first lived in Mossville, lived on outskirts at Prater Road; very family-oriented childhood; businesses in the community; old building where they went to get immunizations; her wedding dance was held at the Paradise Club and her father played the music; went to Teen Town dances at Sacred Heart in Lake Charles; shopped at Mr. Rougeau's store; other shops in community; mechanics fixed cars in their yards; saw many movies at drive-in theater on Highway 90 and theater in Westlake; weather and the drive-in; family favored westerns; mother made matching clothes for Enola and her sister, even though they were different body types; clothing stores in Lake Charles and Sulphur; mother cut their hair; getting hair pressed; different types of hair in family and problems with hair; family was big on nicknames; home remedies; never saw dentist as child; school responsible for inoculations; brother's ankle injury; Enola had surgery for a cyst; got meningitis; mother's medical care during pregnancies; other medical problems of her mother; grandfather came from family of treaters; getting treatment for ringworm; grandfather's horrible-tasting medicinal concoction; castor oil; herbal medicine now fashionable again; uncle's wife treated with leaves and roots; still uses some home remedies, but draws line at castor oil; mother was very progressive and curious, ready to try new things; father instructing her in rice cooking; her parents had learned to cook before the age of ten, so taught Enola and her siblings early, too; childhood concoctions they'd make; cooking coubion; Dad taught her to clean rabbits and chitlins; making gumbo from wild rabbits and squirrels Dad hunted; okra doesn't belong in a chicken and sausage gumbo; making yeast rolls; collecting and preserving wild fruit; as Catholics, observed no meat on Friday rule with stewed fish or eggs and rice; father acted like he was starving going one day without meat; catching crawfish; buying meat, usually cheap cuts; Enola loved her mom's pig tail stew; father often took naps with head on dining table immediately after eating; having to be extra quiet when Dad did shift work and slept odd hours; had to wake Dad up in middle of night to go to work; he liked to play pranks on them; father's work trajectory at Firestone; would come home with black gook on him from the polymer; Enola couldn't sell the house her father built, finally got it dismantled; father's excellent cement and brick work; father started refurbishing business after retiring from Firestone; mother cleaned Sulphur rectory in her later years; her last job was janitorial work in offices; family home

dissembled about a month before interview; disappointment that prospective buyer fell through; Habitat for Humanity couldn't move it; father liked to hold onto things, mother favored letting go; she'd hoped to buy more property and start low-cost housing community, but that didn't work; hopes Sasol will develop lot for residential use; experience of signing over house and seeing it torn down; last family visit to house; feelings about letting go of house; refinery jobs for men of color; vast improvements for workers after Firestone plant unionized; better pay, benefits and work schedules, and more respect; living in constant fear of plant explosions; safety requirements have improved dramatically; improvements from Environmental Protection Act; for black men coming into plant jobs, having a good job outweighed environmental concerns; more environmental awareness now; companies would rather buy out community and shut it down than fix problems; air quality has improved, although still sometimes a yellow haze; concern about water quality; Mossville community was in difficult place of wanting restitution without making the plants mad; blames community leaders for not protecting Mossville; thinks problems could have been addressed earlier, preventing community shutdown; when plants expand, opportunities are more for contractors than locals looking for permanent jobs; problems of building community for those who decide to stay and not to sell their property; Mossville had a great sense of pride for being a successful black community; people make assumptions that she grew up in a ghetto because she's black; huge show of support at her father's funeral; hard to remember everybody after being gone forty years; the community helped her develop pride and confidence; pride that her family has helped shape the US for hundreds of years; professional personal presentation of her teachers; parents always encouraged her to try; happy memories of moonlit nights on the porch with her family; memories of Pete and Virginia Moss driving their horse-drawn wagon; exploring the woods; Mossville is still home.

TAPES: 2 (T4532, T4544)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 3 hours, 18 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 124 pages
T4532 (Session I) 82 pages
T4544 (Session II) 42 pages

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: Four photographs taken during interview, including photographs with interviewer Dragoon. Photographer Chelsea Arseneault.

OTHER MATERIALS: Biographical data form; Correspondence

RESTRICTIONS: none