

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAMES: Sadie Roberts-Joseph and Wilhelmenia Thompson

COLLECTION: 4700.1598

IDENTIFICATION: Roberts-Joseph is the curator and Thompson is the assistant curator of the Odell S. Williams Now and Then Museum of African American History in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

INTERVIEWER: Julia Rose

SERIES: McKinley High School Oral History Project – Social Organizations

INTERVIEW DATE: June 14, 2002

FOCUS DATES: 1990s -2002

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3179, Side A

Introduction of Roberts-Joseph; Odell S. Williams Now and Then Museum of African American History, located at 538 South Boulevard, Baton Rouge; museum's namesake, Sister Odell Williams, taught black history at a time that was not allowed; Williams gave Roberts-Joseph posters of prominent African Americans that she once used secretly in her classroom; Roberts-Joseph used to bring rural artifacts to Juneteenth celebrations; Pastor Joseph Armstrong's contribution to name of museum; evolution from displaying artifacts only at Juneteenth celebrations to having permanent museum space; building the collection through donations, trips to thrift stores and garage sales; story behind a woven basket, made by a New Orleans area truck patch farmer named Sam, that was donated to the museum decades later; Roberts-Joseph is a people person, a respiratory therapy tech; her work with community centers teaching literacy has been rewarding; mission is to disseminate information about the contributions of African Americans, help people look back on past contributions so they can move forward; born in Mississippi; raised in Christian household; she and husband planned to move to Houston, but only got as far as Baton Rouge; her brother was a pastor at her church; description of how two churches merged; layout of old and new church buildings; inconvenient location of baptismal area in old building was one reason for moving; old building almost torn down for parking, but preserved due to sentimental attachment and now houses the museum; attended Southern University but has learned more from life than from school; running for U.S. Senate in 1996, and for lieutenant governor in 1999; local history covered in the museum includes Joseph Delpit and Dr. Louis James; plans for future expansion of museum; Reverend Mary Moody pointed out a picture of her cousin, William Grant Still, when she visited; those types of connections are valuable; plans for outreach to local schools and churches; Wilhelmenia Thompson joins the

interview; recounts houses on South Boulevard in Baton Rouge when she was child; interstate construction devalued the neighborhood; she grew up attending New St. Luke Baptist Church, which is now the museum; is glad they saved the old building; origin of museum was to house Williams' donated posters, also served as a sanctuary for kids after school; Thompson is active in her church; wants to share museum collection with local community and people of all nationalities; Thompson was a public school teacher in East Baton Rouge and Livingston Parishes, is now retired; cares for ill mother who was a longtime member of the church and the second person baptized there; current police station building used to be the Louisiana School for the Deaf; Thompson thinks the museum will help the community blossom again and be instrumental as downtown is built up; happy for preservation of old houses in the neighborhood; Reverend Theodore J. Jemison was a leader during her childhood; business owners the [Ridleys?] and the Scott Taylors; East Boulevard was a major thoroughfare; Myrtle Street used to be Railroad Avenue, train ran down the residential street; Roberts-Joseph recalls a moss factory on South Boulevard; in Thompson's childhood, the circus came to open lot that's now Bogan Walk; Willis Reed, community elder; the Delpit family operated the Chicken Shack restaurant; conclusion.

TAPES: 1 (T3179)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 47 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 28 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Biographical sketch; Correspondence (2 pgs); Photographs (8)

RESTRICTIONS: Roberts-Joseph – No restrictions unless funds are generated from book sales; Thompson – No restrictions