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**4700.2466 Tape 4402**  
**Session I**  
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**[Begin Tape 4402. Begin Session I.]**

**LENORIA AMBROSE:** Wonderful.

**CHELSEA ARSENEAULT:** Yes.

**AMBROSE:** I remember just before . . . Well I guess I'd better not say that either. I'd better hold and wait [laughs].

**CHARLOTTE WILLCOX:** We can start. Go ahead.

**ARSENEAULT:** [00:06] We're good? Okay. Today is January twenty-third, 2015. And I'm Chelsea Arseneault representing the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History with LSU [Louisiana State University] Libraries. We're working in conjunction with the Imperial Calcasieu Museum and Bill Sherman to document the history of Mossville, Louisiana. And to kick that off, we are holding a Mossville oral history day here at the Rigmaiden Recreation Center on Old Spanish Trail. I'm here today with Ms. Lenoria Ambrose. What a beautiful name. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This is going to be a short interview, about fifteen minutes, and we will likely be in touch with you later to set up a much longer interview if you're interested in continuing on.

**AMBROSE:**            I am.

**ARSENEAULT:**      [00:46] Great! Just for the record could you state your full name?

**AMBROSE:**            My name is Lenoria Marie Braxton Ambrose.

**ARSENEAULT:**      Great. And when and where were you born?

**AMBROSE:**            I was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana at the Saint Patrick's Hospital, but I was immediately brought to Mossville where I remained until I married at the age of eighteen and moved to Lake Charles. But my roots are here in Mossville.

**ARSENEAULT:**      [01:13] Great. What are your parents' names?

**AMBROSE:**            My mother's name is Gloria Jean Towner Harris. My father's name is Gradis Braxton.

**ARSENEAULT:**      Could you spell Gradis?

**AMBROSE:**            G-R-A-D-I-S.

**ARSENEAULT:**      And your grandparents' names?

**AMBROSE:**            [01:36] My mother's father's name is William Arthur Towner, and her mother's name is [Birdie?] Mae Perkins Towner. My father's father's name is Lee Braxton, and his mother's name was [Oretha?] Rigmaiden Braxton.

**ARSENEAULT:**      Thank you so much for that.

**AMBROSE:**            I can go back further if you need it [laughs].

**ARSENEAULT:**      I've noticed there's a lot of Rigmaidens and Braxtons. That name is . . .

**AMBROSE:**            But the Perkins and the Mosses the original originals.

**ARSENEAULT:**      [02:17] Okay.

**AMBROSE:**            And I don't know you guys know the story of Mossville where it was called Shoat's Prairie because of all the pigs, the hogs that they had. And then . . . and I always told them whenever I would talk about Mossville, I would tell them that I was from Mossville proper. The railroad track . . . There used to be a sign that said "Mossville." Anything from that railroad track right there all the way back down to . . . past the LaTours' was considered Mossville. They built the school outside of the Mossville area because that was the largest piece of land that they had. And of course then they built the Bel Air and Lincoln Heights subdivisions around it, but that was the . . . This is the original Mossville. Then when you went to Evergreen Road going north, which was called Saprack. And the Braxtons, the LaDouxs, the Rigmaidens,

they were all up there. And down on my end was the Mosses . . . well on my . . . on the Perkins end was the Mosses and the Perkins.

**ARSENEAULT:**    Got you.

**AMBROSE:**        [03:18] And it was called Perkinstown. So before it was Mossville, it was Perkinstown, which I'm from that end, and Saprack, which was the north . . . north end.

**ARSENEAULT:**    So do you know why your family came to Mossville?

**AMBROSE:**        From the history that we have for the Perkins and the Mosses, they were already here. They were in the . . . something they called Little Woods or Big Woods. Which was . . . As close as I can come to the actual location was in the Edgerly area, Vinton over Sulphur, in that area. They were on a farm there. And then they had the Homestead Act of 1862, and they came . . . Why they chose this area? I have no history of that, but I do know that my great great grandmother, Minerva Moss Perkins, homesteaded a hundred and sixty-two acres. That's how the Perkins came here, and the Mosses did the same thing. And the . . . She was a Moss, and married a Perkins. So both of those families were connected. And then Griffin Braxton, he homesteaded a hundred and sixty-two acres up on Evergreen Road, so.

**ARSENEAULT:**    [04:40] That's a lot of land. What is your earliest memory of Mossville?

**AMBROSE:**            School. Going to the old school. And I'm hoping to find a picture of it. It was just this big humongous one story schoolroom with a high, high ceiling. I guess as tall as these ceilings. And we had first, second, and third grades in it. And then there was another building off to the side that was the cafeteria, and on the other side . . . It was on this piece of property, in fact, was the junior high. And during the time that I was coming to school here, if you wanted high school you had to be sent to Lake Charles, to one of the schools in Lake Charles, because that was the nearest high school that we had.

**ARSENEAULT:**        So the original school was on this . . . ?

**AMBROSE:**            [05:35] On this site.

**ARSENEAULT:**        The Rigmaiden Recreational site?

**AMBROSE:**            [Agrees].

**ARSENEAULT:**        So . . . And it was just first, second, and third?

**AMBROSE:**            It was first, second, third in one building, and then they had like junior high . . .

**ARSENEAULT:**        Got you.

**AMBROSE:**            Over in the other building.

**ARSENEAULT:**      Where did you live growing up?

**AMBROSE:**            [05:52] In the Mossville area. I lived down on the west end of Mossville in the Perkinstown area.

**ARSENEAULT:**      Could you describe the house and the property?

**AMBROSE:**            It's funny because just recently I was looking in a magazine, and this magazine had . . . It was called a dog run, or a foxtrot house, are you familiar with that? Where you have the porch with the breezeway in between? Well when my grandfather bought property he . . . It was on this side of the highway, the Old Spanish Trail, I guess about a mile down east . . . west of here. Our house had a living room and a bedroom, was the first house. Then there was a breezeway between. And then there was a kitchen, which was a big kitchen, big enough to put a couch in, and another bedroom. And Daddy always . . .

And then at the back part there was a two bedroom that was detached. And we always asking, "Well Daddy . . ." My grandfather said, "Why didn't you put it together?" He said, "Well," he said, "When I bought the . . . Bought them," he said, "I wanted to have a breezeway where we could sit like in the evening." And he said, "I didn't want the kitchen to be attached to the other part of the house because it would be hot." And then he said, "Well I had these boys and I didn't want them when they grew up to have to wake everybody up when they . . . Their

comings and goings,” so he said, “I put them out in the back.” So we had our own foxtrot or dog run house and didn’t know it. Didn’t know that there was a name for it.

**ARSENEAULT:**     [07:25] So there was a logical reason probably why this . . .

**AMBROSE:**            Yes. And he never put it together. He kept them separate and that was his reasoning for doing that. So I said well that’s . . . I never even thought about that. And then when I was reading about this style of house because I . . . Before they started buying out this area I wanted to move back here for the weekend. I belong to church here, at Mount Zion Baptist Church. And I wanted to leave my house on the weekends and come over here, stay all weekend, and then go back home for the rest of the week because I hate coming back and forth across the bridge to church. And I would come over in the morning at nine o’clock and I would stay until . . . If BTU was at six, I would stay with my uncle who lived down the street until six o’clock. And then I would go to church, and then I would go home.

I’d say, well we have this property here. I could just build a house, a small house, and just stay here on the weekends and then go home on Monday. And then when my family comes here from California, they can stay over here the whole time, so. That was my intentions. And now I’m kind of up in the air. I want to see how many people are going to be left in Mossville before I make the final arrangements of what I’m going to do. But I was going to build a house like that. A small house like the old house that we had.

**ARSENEAULT:**     [08:34] Did y’all have a garden?

**AMBROSE:**            Always had a garden, always had animals, always had chickens. And my uncle . . . I had an uncle, my mother's brother, who always had . . . We had a cow, he had pigs, and we always had horses. In fact, when my uncles went to California, they took their horses with them. Yes, we always had animals. Always. Dogs, cats . . . I never did like dogs, and never did like cats, but we had them. And when my grandmother lived we had chickens because she always liked to cook with the eggs, so. Yes.

**ARSENEAULT:**        [09:15] Great. So I was going to ask where you went to church, but . . .

**AMBROSE:**            Mount Zion. Mount Zion Baptist Church. Yes.

**ARSENEAULT:**        And who were some of the leaders in the church that you . . .?

**AMBROSE:**            Well our church is going to be a hundred and forty nine years old this year. This is our hundred and forty ninth anniversary. Eighteen seventy-six, I think that makes it a hundred and forty nine years. Griffin Braxton, who was my great great great grandfather was one of the first preachers there. And my great great grandfather, Isom Perkins was one of the first deacons. And Isom Perkins was married to Minerva Moss, one of the first Mosses that was here. And of course all of my uncles on the Perkins side belonged to Mount Zion, and they all served as secretaries, or deacons, or some form of office in the church.

**ARSENEAULT:**        Where did you go to school?



**AMBROSE:**            At Mossville High School.

**ARSENEAULT:**      [10:23] Do you remember any teachers?

**AMBROSE:**            Oh, gosh. Yes. When they built Mossville [School] in 1956, I was in fourth grade. And my fourth grade teacher was Mrs. Armstrong. Ethel Armstrong. And my fifth grade teacher was Ethel Mitchell. And then of course in the sixth grade we changed classes, so I had a bunch of teachers in the sixth grade. But some of the teachers that I remember really really well didn't actually teach me, but were teachers in the elementary school were Zella Wiley, or [Battel?] at the time. We have a . . . She was Ms. Kilgore, but she married a Rogers. Became Mrs. Gloria Rogers. High school English. And we had . . . Dolores Spikes was my high school chemistry teacher. My history teacher was Mr. Obie Pete, my high school science teacher was Wilson [Arfay?], and my home economics teacher was Ava Prater.

**ARSENEAULT:**      What year did you graduate?

**AMBROSE:**            [11:46] 1964. And I was Miss Mossville.

**ARSENEAULT:**      Oh! I would love to see that picture.

**AMBROSE:**            My cousin . . . I had a cousin who lived in Long Beach [California]. When he . . . He was born in California. Lived in the San Francisco area, but then he moved down to

Long Beach and he opened a restaurant there and he named the restaurant 70663, which was the zip code.

**ARSENEAULT:**     Wow.

**AMBROSE:**            [12:17] Yes. And the . . . It was based on a lot of Mossville memorabilia. And I . . . My sister said, "Well we're going to go to Mac's restaurant while you're here," she said, "Because I want you to see it before you leave." And she said his wife does the music there. They had jazz every night there and it was just a really quaint little restaurant. And when I walked in there she didn't tell me how . . . it was . . . I knew the name of it and that it was named after Mossville, but when I walked in there, there was all kind of Mossville memorabilia that they had. They had the jackets. Somebody sent him a Mossville jacket that the guys wore. There was pirates . . . it was . . . It had kind of a pirate-y theme because we were the pirates. And then I look on the wall at all these pictures, and there my picture is. I said, "Oh my God. I want my picture. I want to take it home. I don't want anybody to see it!" [Laughing].

**ARSENEAULT:**     Is it still up there? Or does he still have it?

**AMBROSE:**            I think the restaurant is . . . he passed and I think his wife shut the restaurant down after he passed. Yeah.

**ARSENEAULT:**     I wonder where that . . . All that memorabilia went.

**AMBROSE:**            I don't know.

**ARSENEAULT:**      Hmm.

**AMBROSE:**            [13:21] I don't know. I have to ask my sister if she knows anything about what happened because there was a lot of stuff that people had sent him and had given him. And a thing I want to say too, my grandmother, my great great grandmother Minerva Moss Perkins, she homesteaded the hundred and sixty-two acres where the acreage across . . . Slightly across Highway 90 up to the Old Spanish Trail and all the way down to the end of where Mossville is up to . . . Just before you get to Coach Williams Road. That was . . . Her hundred and sixty-two acres were in there. And she was the first in the community to have glass windows in her house, and she had shutters on the front of it I guess in case of the storms and what have you. And her father gave her the windows. She was half Indian and half white and her dad gave her the windows for her house. So we were always pleased when we'd go walking through the woods and passed her house we could see the . . . Because it was there for many many years of my growing up. Going from highway . . . From Old Spanish Trail to Highway 90. I don't know if you're familiar with Highway 90 where you come in . . . Did you guys come in at Prater Road?

**WILLCOX:**            Yes.

**AMBROSE:**            [14:38] That's Highway 90. That's Highway 90 and we would just walk through the woods from here to Highway 90.

**ARSENEAULT:**     Which places were the most important in Mossville? The buildings, and parks, and . . .

**AMBROSE:**     Our church. All the churches. We had Mount Zion Baptist Church, we had a Methodist church, we had a Sanctified church, or Apostolic church. And then we had other churches that came in later like the . . . In fact, just down the street . . . I'm sure some of my family have probably given you that history already, of the Mossville Tabernacle of Faith. That's on my great grandfather's property, on the Towner's. And I haven't told you anything about the Towners yet, but I have a whole book over there that I put together for our . . . the Towner history.

**ARSENEAULT:**     [15:28] Oh, wonderful. That will definitely be something for a follow up interview.

**AMBROSE:**     Yeah.

**ARSENEAULT:**     For sure. That's fantastic.

**AMBROSE:**     And they came here from . . . in about 1906 from Kipling, Louisiana. And my grandfather always . . . and my . . . the Lemelles, have you met any of the Lemelles?

**ARSENEAULT:**     I don't know.

**AMBROSE:**            [15:46] That's my . . .

**WILLCOX:**            [. . .?] mentioned.

**AMBROSE:**            Okay. Well they . . .

**ARSENEAULT:**        [. . .?] mentioned.

**AMBROSE:**            That's one . . . She married into the Lemelle family, one of my grandfather's sisters. And they always liked to tell you when we'd say Sugartown, it wasn't Sugartown. It was Kipling. And I've looked and I can't find Kipling. I don't know if it's no longer Kipling or maybe I'm not spelling it right, but they were from Kipling, Louisiana. And I don't know why . . . And probably for work reasons they left Sugartown. My grandfather was four years old and his oldest sister . . . His older sister was two years old. And he . . . My grandfather, whenever we'd go to DeRidder [Louisiana] to see his family he would mark every place on the side of the road where they stopped and camped. I said, "Daddy how can you remember that? You were only four years old." He said, "I remember. I remember." And he would tell us every spot. It took them days to come here because they were in a wagon. And he likes to tell . . . He liked to tell us that story. And when they first came here they moved up on Evergreen Road. They bought . . . My great grandfather bought property up there before he moved down here, but they lived up there for many years, so.

**ARSENEAULT:**        [16:58] So much history.

**AMBROSE:**            Yes. A lot of history. That's why I didn't want them to sell . . . to tear Mossville up. Because it's . . . even though I don't live here anymore, I came over here for . . . We use this community center for a lot of our family affairs, and then I had a lot of family still left here. And it was just . . . I don't know. It just broke my heart to see them disrupted. But we still have our church, so I'm hoping we won't sell our church.

**ARSENEAULT:**      So kind of going off that, what does home mean to you?

**AMBROSE:**            [17:28] It's my life, it's my soul, it's . . . Everything that I know. I mean I've been married, well if my husband had lived we would have been married fifty years next year. I lived that time in Lake Charles, but still I'm right across the street. And I worked at the plants for forty years. And it's just home. It's our lifeblood. It's our memories. It's everything. And I just . . . I don't know. I guess everybody isn't connected like we are because we know that we were the first ones here. My families were the first ones here. And they made Mossville what it is and they instilled in us a pride of home. That was one thing they always . . . I can remember from a little bitty kid when they would be telling us things is to always be . . . Your word is your bond always. Anytime anybody want to make a deal with you, do it with a handshake and keep your promise.

Get an education and learn. My grandfather had a third grade education and I had a third grade primer and in that . . . And I used to wonder I said, "Well Daddy only had a third grade education, how could he do math so fast and measure things?" My grandfather and his brothers were all master carpenters. And they could just read . . . and my grandfather, if he put something on the wall, it was straight straight straight. He put a ruler on it. And I said, "Daddy how do you

know all that fractions?" And when we were learning our time tables and all those kinds of things, and then I looked at that primer and in third grade they had fractions. And he learned . . . They learned their time tables.

They learned things they don't even teach kids nowadays. I've seen so many kids . . . We had a restaurant in Lake Charles and they didn't even know their time tables. High schoolers. They don't teach it to them. They think that they're going to get it just through doing. But we got it through memorization. So I said well they had a third grade education, but probably in today's times it probably was equal to a sixth grade education . . . seventh grade education. Because math was one of the . . . they didn't know a lot about . . . and then they diagram sentences. Something I had in high school, but kids don't do that anymore either I don't think. So the formal education they had, it might have been only second, or third, or fourth grade educations, but it was so much in that that they had, which I thought was just priceless. Priceless. So Mossville is my home. And wherever I go, it'll always be home. Whether we're here or not.

**ARSENEAULT:**     [20:10] So what does community mean to you?

**AMBROSE:**     Oh, God. Well when I was growing up, that's been a long time ago, you know how they say it takes a village to raise? This was a village. Everybody knew everybody. Everybody was related to everybody. If it wasn't through blood it was through marriage, or just through a bond of friendship. And everybody looked out for everybody's kids. We always rode the school bus to school, but when there were days that we decided we wanted to walk, and we would conveniently miss the bus, well we would stop and pick blackberries along the road. And

before we get home my mom knew where we had been, how long it had taken us, because somebody was watching all the way down the road until we got home.

[20:57] So it's a . . . It was a wonderful place to grow up. A wonderful place to grow up. We had stores here. We had black owned stores. We had a canteen which was . . . Two canteens. The Lyon's . . . Lula Lyons had our first canteen which was right across the street. Then we had . . . The Freelow's had one down by the school. So we had . . . There were a lot of businesses that we had in Mossville. People had grocery stores. Right across the track on the right hand side there was a grocery store. Ira Garrett owned that grocery store. And then right down the street the Rigmaiden . . . Josh Rigmaiden, who donated this land, he had a little grocery store.

So it was always things to do. And then our churches were . . . We were active in our churches. There was a lot of activity going on in church. There was always something. If there wasn't eating Sunday dinners on the ground, there were penny marches, and pew rallies, it was just always something to do. It was a busy little community.

**ARSENEAULT:**     [22:06] Well our time's almost up. On behalf of the center and the museum we appreciate your contribution today. Did you want to say anything else in closing?

**AMBROSE:**            No. I'm just glad that they're doing this. I just wish they had done it before they started the selling process. Because it was important, and Mossville is important. It's important to a whole lot of people. And it would have been so much better had everybody been here and we could have . . . We would have had time to prepare a little bit better and get a little bit more information so that they could have had a thorough history because there's so many important things. And I don't know if you guys have been told about the [Rockamore?] Center or



the orphan home they had here back in the . . . I don't know what years it was, but there was just . . . we . . . it was just a bustling community. And a lot of people worked here. If they weren't farmers, they were . . . They worked in the sawmills and they worked at the industry once the . . . in 1936 Olin was the first plant here. And a lot of people worked in industry. So we've just had . . . I just can't really say anything negative about it. It's home.

**ARSENEAULT:**      [23:19] Well thank you so much for sharing that with us.

**AMBROSE:**            I'm glad I could share. I'm glad I could share.

**ARSENEAULT:**      We will . . . This concludes the interview. We'll be in touch with the possibility of setting up a longer second interview to follow up.

**AMBROSE:**            [23:31] Okay.

**ARSENEAULT:**      This is a great place to start definitely.

**AMBROSE:**            Well I hope I gave you guys a . . .

**[23:38]**

**[End Tape 4402. End Session I.]**