

Interviewee: Ronnie Banks, Sr.
Interviewer: Kathleen Donner
Transcriber: Laura Spikerman
Auditor: Anne Wheeler
Editor: Chelsea Arseneault

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[Begin Tape 4403. Begin Session I.]

KAT DONNER: Follow up. I'm going to have to repeat that for the recording as well.

RONNIE BANKS: Okay. Sure.

DONNER: [00:15] Alright so today is January twenty-fourth, 2015. I'm Kat Donner 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 with 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 . . .

BANKS: Ronnie Banks.

DONNER: Thank you. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This is going to be a short interview, about fifteen minutes, and we'll likely be in touch with you later to set up a longer interview.

BANKS: [00:53] Okay.

DONNER: Alright. So can you just state your full name for me one more time?

BANKS: Yes. My name is Ronnie Banks, Senior.

DONNER: Okay. And when and where were you born?

BANKS: I was born in Sulphur, Louisiana, February twenty-first, 1954. Sixty years ago
[laughs].

DONNER: And what were your parents' names?

BANKS: Leon Banks and Catherine [Macloud?].

DONNER: [01:25] Okay. And what did they do?

BANKS: My mom was a stay and home mom, and my dad was an industrial worker. A
plant worker . . . worked at the plant.

DONNER: Okay. So what brought you to Mossville?

BANKS: [01:40] Well, Mossville . . . As I said I lived briefly in Mossville, then we lived
in Sulphur, but Mossville was the only place that we could go for our entertainment. And we

would actually . . . From Sulphur to Mossville is approximately three miles. And we would, many times on the weekend, walk here at this very center. They used to have record hops, and we used to come dance, and the only place that we could meet girls [laughs]. Yes.

DONNER: And what were some of the other meeting places around town?

BANKS: Well, and then of course I came up preaching at Mount Zion Baptist Church here. And of course I started preaching in 1976, some thirty-nine years this come May. So I came up preaching here and had a chance to meet a lot of the people here in Mossville and to work with them. And I actually own a rent house in Mossville today.

DONNER: [02:50] Okay. And I know that you did not actually live in Mossville for very long . . .

BANKS: Not long, right. We lived for a period of time when I was younger, but we never lost connection with Mossville or the people of Mossville. In fact, the year that I was scheduled to go to Mossville High School, it was integrated that year and I ended up going to Sulphur High, but had the integration not taken place I would have gone to Mossville High. But we used to go to Mossville . . . All the football games and the high school we would come to the pep rallies. And they had a chance to know the principals and many of the teachers here in Mossville. So Mossville was really like . . . Really the only place that we could come to be entertained and to really interact with people other than people in Sulphur.

DONNER: [03:53] Okay. So what were the other schools that you attended? Like grade school . . .

BANKS: I went to . . . It was first named Sulphur [Cullen?] Elementary, and then it was changed to Birdie Aikens. Then I went to W.W. Lewis, and graduated from Sulphur High. Went to McNeese. Graduated from McNeese [University] in 1976, and went to a law school and seminary at Howard University in Washington D.C.

DONNER: Okay.

BANKS: [04:23] Yes.

DONNER: Awesome. Well whenever you were living in Mossville, do you have any memories of what your house was like? Your property, the land . . .

BANKS: [04:32] Yeah. We lived in a ten room home. Middle class community. Mossville was always a place that was . . . a lot of pride in Mossville. People worked together and they were actually able to get a lot of things done like the swimming pool and this place here that we were not able to get in Sulphur. It always amazed me the amount of unity and the team community unity that Mossville had and they were able to get a lot of things done in Mossville. Mossville was . . . although Mossville did not have a government, but Mossville was like . . . really it was our . . . as blacks, Mossville was really our life, really because like I say it was the only place that we . . . They call it a canteen. I don't know if y'all even know what a canteen is [laughs].

DONNER: Could you describe it for us? Because we've been hearing that a lot.

BANKS: Yes. Ms. [Risa Mae?] who lives near one of the homes that I own in Mossville, she owned the canteen. And a canteen was a place where you could go . . . Young people, teenagers could go to listen to music and dance and meet people. It was our only real place of entertainment. You could go and you could shoot pool there. And Ms. Risa Mae, she was a woman who loved young people, but she didn't go for no foolishness. I mean you listened to Ms. Risa Mae. So yeah I have very pleasant memories of Mossville. In fact, I dated many girls . . . well a few girls in Mossville [laughs]. I'll just say a few. But Mossville was divided by the tracks here. Up to the track it was called . . . well it was called one thing, but then across the track it was called Bel Air. Then it was all Mossville, but it was different communities. Described as different communities. So I had a girlfriend in each community [laughs].

DONNER: [06:54] Alright. Girls in different area codes.

BANKS: Yes [laughs].

DONNER: Nice. So you were talking about Ms. Risa Mae? That was her name?

BANKS: Risa Mae. Yes. Risa Mae.

DONNER: What were some of the other community leaders?

BANKS: Coach Williams. LaSalle Williams who is . . . Really I regard as a living legend. In fact, Coach Williams has a street named after him, Cities Service Highway. I remember Arthur [Achan?] who's the pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church. And before him Reverend Taylor. And Steve [Mott?] was another one of the . . . He was a coach here. And actually Mossville was one of the greatest high schools in America. I mean because Mossville was like . . . I mean like I said, up until integration Mossville was the only school that we could go to. Even the people from Sulphur. They would bus people from Sulphur into Mossville. And what was really interesting about Mossville is we rarely could come to Mossville without having to physically fight because they didn't want us to date their girls [laughs]. But we didn't have any girls in Sulphur so we just kind of had to continue with that. So many of the guys who are now grown live here in Mossville, we're now friends and . . . But we remember each other from many many years back.

DONNER: [08:34] Great. I've heard a little bit about the whole tensions there . . .

BANKS: Yes. Oh, yeah.

DONNER: Let's see . . .

BANKS: And then also I remember Mr. MacDaniel. He was principal at Mossville High and because of the fact that we really had nowhere to go in terms of entertainment we would be allowed to go to the pep rallies and really share in the life of this community.

DONNER: So I mean I'm just going to take a step back here.

BANKS: Sure.

DONNER: [09:15] You talked about how the education at Mossville High was really great.

BANKS: Right.

DONNER: Can you just tell me a little bit more about that in detail? I've just been hearing at lot. It just . . .

BANKS: Right. Well I don't personally know anything about the quality of education at Mossville other than the fact that I had a lot of friends who came from Sulphur who was bussed to Mossville because the year that I was scheduled to come to Mossville, the integration . . . I was integrated and I ended up going to Sulphur High.

DONNER: Okay.

BANKS: And I was kind of happy that it was integrated because I didn't feel like having to fight every other day [laughs]. I even managed to get in a few fights just visiting the school from time to time.

DONNER: Oh, no!

BANKS: [09:57] But Mossville is a great community. Great people. And a people who were greatly unified. And as a result of them being able to be unified, I mean they basically . . . I

mean they have things now in Mossville that we still don't have in Sulphur like the swimming pool. So Mossville was able to accomplish a lot as a community. Like the center there, the gym and all of that. I mean we never had all of that. We would have to come to Mossville . . . we would come at . . . We had . . . I played basketball and just community basketball leagues. And we would go to the Mossville gym to actually play. Mossville was the center . . . of Sulphur and even just for the citizens of . . . because that's . . . You're only talking about two or three miles apart. And they made us feel a part of Mossville, and I still consider Mossville as certainly being a part of my upbringing, and influenced me.

DONNER: [11:09] So what does community mean to you?

BANKS: Well I think community means to me people able to work together, able to get along together, and to get things accomplished for the good of the whole. And that's one of the things that I see in Mossville even today. Mossville is a well-respected community. In fact, I met a lady coming in here and she said . . . she asked me her name. I didn't know her name. She said, "You dated a girl lived next to me." And I was able to remember. I remember that. So Mossville is a beautiful city with very beautiful people as a community. Very much unified, very much together, and they respected each other and as a result of that they were able to get a lot of things accomplished in Mossville. In fact, we used to . . . I used to play baseball coming up. And right next to us is the baseball park and we played all of our games right here in Mossville. I mean like Mossville was just the center of our entertainment hub. We had basically nowhere else to go. We came and swim at the swimming pool. It was pretty much . . . Even though I lived in Sulphur, Mossville was very much a part of my upbringing as well.

DONNER: [12:40] So what does home mean to you? Being that you were from Sulphur, but you frequented Mossville so often?

BANKS: Well I have a global concept of home. Home I think is not necessarily to be restricted to a particular address, but I think wherever you have been influenced and somehow made the better, that would be also a part of home as well. And I've always considered Mossville as a home because as I said as long as I can remember, I remember Mossville being very much a part of my upbringing and influenced me as I was coming up as a young man. And in terms of morals, in terms of coming up in the church, I started preaching when I was twenty-two, but prior to that I was like the youth speaker for the state of Louisiana. So I would travel around different states . . . Travel around different cities within the state of Louisiana as a youth speaker, and Mossville is one of the places that I got my start. At Mount Zion Baptist Church. Became a preacher through there, and so yes. Mossville is a great city.

DONNER: It is.

BANKS: [14:03] [Agrees].

DONNER: And what sort of changes have you witnessed in Mossville?

BANKS: Well I was . . . I left for thirty years, and I've only been back for two years, but I noticed Mossville . . . and I guess my perspective would be quite different from as an adult versus my teenager years. But I guess basically what I can glean was my continued connection with Mossville mainly through owning a home here and the church . . . Interacting with the

people. The people still nice people. They're still . . . They know me from when I came up as a boy to now.

And I guess probably the main thing that I've noticed is that with many of the people who were adults when I came up are no longer on the scene. Many of them are dead now. And I now know their children as adults and the unity that was once realized in Mossville, I see a difference in that now because many of the older people seem to . . . they just . . . They loved Mossville, they were committed to Mossville, and their whole world was Mossville basically. So that's the major difference. I see a difference in the view of community now versus when I was coming up as a boy.

DONNER: [15:45] And . . . Pretty much just to wrap things up. I just have like, two more questions for you. What is something that you would like for people to remember that is not recorded in history books?

BANKS: Well I would like people to remember that Mossville was a city that allowed for diversity in the sense of my living in Sulphur in so far as the adults were concerned we were included into the fabric and I mean of course in fact, again, the lady that . . . who talked to me as I was coming in she knows my mother, she knew my parents, and I know the parents of many of the children that live here now. So Mossville was not only for Mossville residents. Mossville was a place that included young people from Westlake, from Sulphur. I mean Mossville was everything to us.

I mean without Mossville we wouldn't have had any place to go or anything to do. I mean I remember Mossville was such a part of our lives that we would literally . . . At the record hop they would play music and we would dance in this very place here. We would actually walk

back to Sulphur. That was like two or three miles. And we'd . . . every weekend we came to Mossville. So Mossville . . . great place, great people. And I'm glad that you're doing what you're doing to record the history of Mossville because I think the world should know about Mossville.

DONNER: [17:41] Well thank you so much for contributing to it.

BANKS: Thank you. Thank you.

DONNER: Is there anything else that you would like to add before we wrap things up?

BANKS: Nothing other than the fact that you're a great interviewer, and you're great at what you're doing. And thank you for the opportunity to share.

DONNER: Thank you so much.

BANKS: Yeah.

[17:57]

[End Tape 4403. End Session I.]