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[Begin Tape 4408. Begin Session I.]

DOUGLAS MUNGIN: So, today is January 24, 2015, and I'm Douglas Mungin, representing the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History with LSU [Louisiana State University] Libraries. We are working in conjunction with the Imperial Calcasieu Museum and Bill Shearman to document the history of Mossville, Louisiana. And to kick that off, we are holding Mossville Oral History Day here at the Rigmaiden Recreation Center on Old Spanish Trail. I'm here today with--

KENENTH LEE: Kenneth Lee. Arthur Kenneth Lee.

MUNGIN: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This is going to take about fifteen minutes long, and, like Jennifer [A. Cramer] said, we're going to probably follow up with you after this interview. Alright, so could you please state your full name once again?

LEE: [00:42] Arthur Kenneth Lee.

MUNGIN: And when were you born?

LEE: September 26, 1948.

MUNGIN: And where were you born?

LEE: I was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

MUNGIN: And what did your parents do?

LEE: My parents were Richard and Elaine Lemelle Lee. My father was a plant worker for a number of years.

MUNGIN: What plant?

LEE: [01:13] At Citgo. And back then, it was Cities Service. He also, after working at Cities Service for a number of years, he worked as an assistant veterinarian for Dr. Morris, a small animal hospital . . .

MUNGIN: Where at?

LEE: In Lake Charles.

MUNGIN: In Lake Charles? And what does your mom do?

LEE: My mom was a domestic, and she was like a LPN, a nurse, for the Garrison family, the Bells in Lake Charles.

MUNGIN: [01:52] And are your parents from the Lake Charles area, too?

LEE: They are here from Mossville, and my father was from what they call Bayou D'Inde which is a little south from Mossville. It's, Highway 90 separates it.

MUNGIN: Okay. And what are your grandparents' names?

LEE: [02:12] My mom's parents were Edward and Ida Mae Lemelle, and my grandmother was a Towner before marriage. My dad's daddy was a Richard-- I mean, my dad, Richard Lee, his father's name was Jim Lee, and his mother was named Alder, and she was an Olivier before marriage.

MUNGIN: And are they also originally from Mossville?

LEE: No, my grandfather was from Bayou D'Inde and my grandmother on my dad's side was from around [Grand Mary?].

MUNGIN: Grand Mary. Where's Grand Mary?

LEE: South of. . . Southeast of here. About twenty, thirty miles on the other side of, in St. Martin Parish.

MUNGIN: Okay. So, could you give me your earliest memory of Mossville? Like, growing up?

LEE: Man, that's, there's so many memories. There were times, my happiest times was riding horses and going to help with butchers on the weekends. We'd go pen cows and run cattle. Everybody had cattle, just about a cow or two, and they would kind of run wild there. There wasn't any [cow?] pen laws back then. And cows was that large, and we would go get them and brand them . . .

MUNGIN: [03:55] What's cow pen laws?

LEE: . . . in the spring. You know, where stock was running at large back on the bayou. We'd get together and go pen them up. Uncles and cousins and all had animals, and whoever's cow or calf was on the brand, they would brand them with that. Then with the brand that the mama cow had. It was great to have that kind of freedom and adventure. You'd work and you'd complain about, I had an uncle that ran a farm, and we would work and my brother, my uncles, and all, all the boys would work on the farm. He said, they told us they was educating us about ignorance. At the time, six, seven years old, you're doing things and really not grasping what they're trying to tell you. Then later on in life you catch on to what they're saying about educating you about ignorance. If you don't get a good education, that you going to have to work hard all your life and you don't want to do that. Once you realize what they was trying to tell you, you kind of went back to school and stayed on the honor roll.

MUNGIN: [laughs]

LEE: [05:41] I finished like at Mossville. I was president of my senior class and vice-president of the student council, captain of the basketball team. It opened my eyes at an early age that you needed a good education. I pushed my children, all of them went to college. One of them, my oldest daughter has a doctor's in education, and she's presently superintendent of education in Smithsville, Virginia. [Lee clarifies that she was superintendent of Isle of Wright County Schools in Smithfield, Virginia]. My baby girl is a RN, and she has two children. She's back in school to be a nurse practitioner. My son, he went to school, to college, and he works for the tax office here in Calcasieu Parish. Tax assessor.

MUNGIN: Wow, congratulations.

LEE: [06:45] Yeah, and I tried the same fear that my uncle and them did with us. Educating about ignorance. It seemed to work. My brother finished college. Education is the key to success.

MUNGIN: And was education. . . So your uncles told you about education. Did your parents also. . .

LEE: Yeah, yeah! Well, my dad, man, if you didn't make the honor roll, you had to meet the strap, you understand? He stressed it. Stressed education. And athletics and education would get you out of here. Athletics would help you get a scholarship. It was one of the things

that we strived for. And, we seem to have accomplished it. Now, look back on it, you didn't want to meet Richard Lee's straps, so you got those books. My uncle, Shelton Jordan, was one of the first ones started with that education about ignorance, and it seemed to caught on. My dad and them would say the same thing, my grandfather and all of them. They just played a bass, it was something along the beat of a bass drum in the back of your head when you were thinking about slacking. I'm going to hang out with the boys and cut up and all that, and you out there and you think about what they told you, and you'd look around. Look around. It don't take a rocket science to see that you need that education, and, it seemed to work for us.

MUNGIN: So where did you go to school again?

LEE: I went to Mossville.

MUNGIN: Elementary?

LEE: [08:50] And all through school. I went from first grade to twelfth grade, to Mossville. I came, I graduated in '66 [1966]. And I went to Grambling, and in '68 I got drafted in the military. I went to the military and . . .

MUNGIN: Army, navy?

LEE: Army. Combat engineer in Vietnam, 1969 to 1970, I was in Vietnam. And I was injured, and I came home. While I was in the hospital, laying up there, I thought about what my

. . . education about ignorance. There were classes that were offered to the injured and the disabled veterans while you rehabilitate, and I took advantage of it. I went to the postal school, and I also went to the federal investigator school. I came out, after I came out the service, I worked for the postal office, for the federal government at the post office. Then I went to work at the sheriff's office, and that's it. [Lee worked for the patrol department and eventually became the resident deputy of Mossville]

MUNGIN: So you worked at the sheriff's office?

LEE: [10:13] I worked twenty-one years for Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Office, and I worked twenty-one years at Citgo. I came back from Vietnam. I went to school, and was working at the post office. I couldn't sleep, so I had . . . They had union trouble out at Citgo, so the sheriff sent some of us out there to work and [?]. And to try to keep down the trouble, and there, I was out there and Citgo offered me a job. So I took the job and I went to talk to the sheriff. He said, "Well, I'm going to make an exception. You're a good deputy, and I need good deputies." And he said, "You work out a schedule with Citgo, and you work out a schedule with me and turn it in, and we'll see how it works. And we might, we want to keep you on, we don't want to lose you." I worked both of those jobs, twenty-one years.

MUNGIN: Wow.

LEE: Sixteen hours a day. Because I couldn't sleep. I had PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder]. Back then, they didn't know what that was.

MUNGIN: Yeah.

LEE: Because I was injured that night in Vietnam, and then several other people got hurt.

MUNGIN: What happened, may I ask?

LEE: [11:33] I really wouldn't like to go into it too much. I also got injured, and it disabled me. As older I got, the more problems it gave me, so I eventually became one hundred percent disabled and I had to stop working. I had to go back and do some more surgery on my leg and foot. Well, anyway, I don't like to talk about it too much. [sighs] It was just one of those things that happened. At the time, I regretted it, and I kind of had a chip on my shoulder about it, but as time went and aged and looked around at the situations, at the rest of the world. I got a chance to visit, to go back to the hospital injured. I got a chance to see Japan, Hawaii, and stuff like that, where I was in the hospital on the way back. I say, "Oh, America's not that bad. It's great."

I was bitter because I got drafted. During the sixties, there was a lot of, how would you say it? A lot of controversy going on about the black and white thing here, and you go over there and Hannah was on the radio with that music. And you be playing music and then they'd butt in, and she'd come in there telling you that they killed five at Jackson State, "What are you doing, black men? This is not your war." I mean, all that in your mind, you're going through all of that and it's a tough knot. Then you come back home, and you see some of that going, some of what she was saying, and it kind of spoiled in your stomach. But that was the sign of the times,

America was going through a transition. You know, it took a little longer in some places for it to take place.

But, I was raised here, in this all-black community. We had contact with whites, and it wasn't that bad, you know what I'm saying? My grandfather, my dad's dad . . . when it wasn't that bad. Because a lot of that stuff that went on, I really didn't see. I seen the signs, but it didn't bother me. It just, it was a hell of a time to grow up in. And to live to see a black president. It can only happen in America. I really enjoyed my life here, in Mossville. Blessings, I've enjoyed my blessings that I've received throughout life, and things that I have created. And I got bought out, I moved up, I upgraded. Conoco bought me out the first time, sixteen, seventeen years ago. Now, I'm cashing in on my mom's property, which helps a lot. I upgraded my place, where I'm at now, some more. It's just been a blessing. Like I tell, it's been good. What's good for me might not be good for you, and what's good for you might not be good for me. But I really, I think it's a blessing.

MUNGIN: [16:11] So, to kind of backtrack a little bit, so where did you grow up? Where was your family's house?

LEE: On Old Spanish Trail, right here on Prater [Road]. Around Prater. My grandmother and them owned that whole block, like right behind, right at the corner of Prater and Old Spanish Trail. My grandmother's house was just west of there, and my uncle's house was south of there. I mean, it was my mom's house because my uncle didn't have a house back then. Because he was a couple years older than me. My mom's house was in the back here, and my

other auntie here. It was just a little family block, you know? Everybody was your uncle, auntie, your cousin, and I grew up here. And . . .

MUNGIN: So your property, it was a pretty big property that you guys grew up on.

LEE: Yeah, well, yeah my grandfather had a pretty good piece. My grandfather on my dad's side had two hundred acres down there by PPG. The old Jim Lee subdivision that came all the way up from like, from the [Calcasieu] River, to the Highway 90. But my grandfather and them here, they must have going about two or three, about three or four acres of property. Because, that's several houses on it. Yeah, I guess, it seems like more than that when you're growing corn and working on it, you know?

MUNGIN: Yeah, so you guys had like, vegetables and a garden?

LEE: [17:58] Oh yes, oh yes. You had a vegetable garden, you had animals.

MUNGIN: So what did you have?

LEE: My grandfather grew corn, purple peas, and all sorts, tomatoes, all kinds of vegetables. We also had chickens, had several hogs, and a cow or two. A little farm, I guess you could call it a farm, but it was a little truck patch where you could get vegetables and pear trees and stuff like that. You could preserve, pickle them. My grandmother would put them up for preserves.

MUNGIN: Did most of the other folks in this community have like, livestock and gardens too?

LEE: Yeah, basically, I'd say seventy-five percent of them had some kind of little small garden or grew vegetables in the area. [portion restricted per Lee's request]

MUNGIN: Just a couple more questions. So who were some of the community leaders of Mossville? So you've been here most of your life . . .

LEE: [19:01] Oh, oh yeah. Mr. Rigmaiden, Josh Rigmaiden. James Rigmaiden. McKeever. You know, Edwards. Coach Williams. During my time, it was mostly like Coach Williams and James Rigmaiden were two of the most looked-up-to. Because Coach was our coach, and he gave us a lot of guidance. Family guidance, like in the, James was also a coach and a teacher at Mossville. You kind of already respected and looked up to them.

And a couple of the teachers that were, like Mrs. Rogers and all. And there were quotes, like she would say like, "It behooves you to pay attention and understand what I'm trying to tell you, you know? But you not listening." Things like that stayed with you. You'd be in school, you'd be drifting off, and it would come in your head, "It would behoove you to pay attention." Things like that. It's, man, just you could go on and on with people that touch your life in different ways. No one really done anything that I could remember that, at the time, you might go oh man she's mean or this, she's that. As you got older, you realized they was only interested in your best interest, you know?

We had a couple teachers. We used to call them "The Warden" and all of that. After you got to college and everything, a bunch of friends you knew from the other schools would have to take remedial subjects. Most of the kids from Mossville, we went and we done all the regular classes instead of having to take remedial subjects. You'd say, "Mossville was working." Coach, if you didn't, you had to make at least a C or B before they started all this with the grades and stuff in school about not being able to participate in sports. Coach Williams had already enforced these rules and regulations.

MUNGIN: Before they were mandatory.

LEE: [21:59] Yeah. That was some of the things. We go somewhere and the bus break down, somebody ask you, "Where you at?" What you going to do, scratch your head? Pay attention to the road signs and know where you at. You never know when you have an emergency. Little simple things like that. In junior high, we were just cutting up on the bus. Every now and then, he would ask somebody where we was. He'd say, "Where we at?" And you better be able to give them an answer where you at. Them signs on the road is there for a purpose.

MUNGIN: Yeah.

LEE: It opened your eyes to little things like that. They'd say oh, Coach, crazy man, he wanted you to read the signs, going down the road, all that mile-marker this and all that. But he was all the time, he was teaching you that, putting some direction in your life.

MUNGIN: So, a couple more questions and then we're going to call it a day. What places were some of the more important places in Mossville? Like houses, buildings--

LEE: Big Mama's, on Sundays or any day, was the spot. Big Mama. Sunday, you went to church, you walked to Mt. Zion and to Sunday school. We went to church and about every Sunday, we'd go back to Big Mama's house. It was a family dinner. The other places, this is like later on, they had the rec, the swimming pool. Being free to ride horses in the woods and deal with Mother Nature and camp out. We would load up on the Fourth of July, my great-grandfather Towner, we would go up on the river and camp out for the Fourth of July every year. That was my favorite spots, and my grandfather, my daddy's dad, back in the day when they had the black side and the white side, he ran the black side of the Midway [drive-in movie theater] because he sold the property for the old drive-in theater out there on Highway 90. One of the stipulations that they would have an area for the blacks. That was another place where we'd go watch the movies. Basically, Big Mama's House was--

MUNGIN: The go-to spot.

LEE: [24:50] That was the spot, man. You go to Big Mama's house, and she's going to feed everybody, I don't care who that. "Where you want to go?" "Hey man, let's go to your grandma's house!" You know, Big Mama had some snacks for you. But you going to do the right thing over there, though. She was great. She made a big imprint. She was a big boot mark in my life. Because, parents worked, both of them worked. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother

and grandfather. They were very loving and understanding, and what they had rules that you had to go by, and you had to do it. Nobody could whup like Big Mama. You know--

MUNGIN: Yeah.

LEE: But nobody could be no kinder than her. You know? You just did what you needed to do.

MUNGIN: So, last three questions then we're done. What does home mean to you?

LEE: Man, that's a hard one. Because, I really never left Mossville. Even though I moved up to Gillis, Moss Bluff, every day just about I'd come see my mother, my grandmother. Then they passed. I still come through here and ride, because I made my living here and I'd be looking for changes. Seeing it disappear and what it's, I think it's a good thing. But, home to me is, man, I can't really put it in words, I couldn't give it-- There's not a word in the dictionary that, to me, that would really describe, you know? And, I love Mossville. The area and the people. I made my living here. I wouldn't want to try to put it to words. No more than what I said that because I couldn't give it the justice, with one word, what home means to me.

MUNGIN: This one might be a little more difficult, but what does community mean to you?

LEE: [27:33] Family. Because Mossville was a community of family. It was somewhere, someone, they all were connected. You start seeing it disappear with the school

closing, the churches separating, and this that and the other, and the people, community, parts of being sold out and bought out. But, change-- Who am I to say it's wrong, and who am I to say it's right? Like again I say, "What's good for you might not be good for me, and what's good for me might not be. . ." Vice versa.

MUNGIN: What's the most important thing you want people to remember about Mossville?

LEE: [28:23] [whistles] Man, I'm getting cold chills on that one. Man. That it was home. It was everything. Family and friends. It just, kindness and goodness in the people's heart. During the times that we grew up here. It's, that's my fond memories. Again that's [. . .?].

MUNGIN: Yeah, I got you. Is there anything else you want to add in closing?

LEE: Not really, man. You touched base about on everything I had to say. All I can tell you is I hope Sasol has success and I'm proud to say that I once lived there, but it hurts.

MUNGIN: Yeah. So that's going to wrap up our time for today. I want to thank you so much for participating. I know a lot of issues kind of come up during these interviews, so I just really want to thank you so much for your time and for just breaking it down for us today.

LEE: Yeah, it's a blessing in disguise. In a way. But, you know, you can always keep it here, in your heart.

MUNGIN: Alright, so that's going to conclude our interview.

[30:21]

[End Tape 4408. End Session I.]