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Session I
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[Begin Tape 4419. Begin Session I.]

DOUGLAS MUNGIN: Perfect. Today is January twenty-third, 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 with Bill Shearman 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 . . .

VERA PAYNE: [00:29] Vera Payne.

MUNGIN: Thank you for agreeing to interview with us.

VERA PAYNE: You're welcome.

MUNGIN: This interview hopefully is going to go about fifteen, twenty minutes, and then we're planning on setting up a follow up interview with you a little bit later. So could you please state your full name?

PAYNE: Vera J. Payne.

MUNGIN: And when and where were you born?

PAYNE: [00:46] I was born in Calcasieu Parish.

MUNGIN: And what year?

PAYNE: 1944.

MUNGIN: And do you have any siblings?

PAYNE: I have two sisters. I'm the older of the three.

MUNGIN: And what are their names?

PAYNE: Margaret Thomas and Deborah Prater.

MUNGIN: And what are your parents' names?

PAYNE: Morris and Irene Prater.

MUNGIN: [01:03] And what did they do?

PAYNE: Morris Prater is retired, and Irene Prater is a homemaker. Dad originally worked for . . . In the 50s for Maplewood when they had their processing plant and whatever back there.

MUNGIN: What's Maplewood?

PAYNE: Maplewood is a subdivision off to the north of us. Northwest. And Mom's been a homemaker.

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

PAYNE: My grandparents on my paternal side was Earthy and Eunice Prater. And on my maternal side was Sophie and Joseph Vincent.

MUNGIN: And so did your family . . . so were you born in this area? In Mossville?

PAYNE: [01:45] No, I was not born in this area. I was born a little north of here. More toward the DeQuincy area.

MUNGIN: Okay. And when did your family move to Mossville?

PAYNE: I was roughly eight years old.

MUNGIN: Okay. What year was that?

PAYNE: Probably about 1952. Something like that.

MUNGIN: Okay. And why did your family move from near the DeQuincy area to Mossville?

PAYNE: Because my father's from this area.

MUNGIN: He was originally from this area.

PAYNE: Yes. My . . .

MUNGIN: And . . . Sorry.

PAYNE: [02:11] My father's dad is Earthy Prater that Prater Road was named after.

MUNGIN: And who was Earthy Prater? Your great grandparent . . .

PAYNE: My great grandfather.

MUNGIN: And so I mean is he one of the original founders of . . . Original families of Mossville?

PAYNE: No I think somewhat of a direct descendant, but not one of the original.

MUNGIN: So when did your family kind of move into Mossville?

PAYNE: My family moved here through the LeDoux, and the Mosses, and Vincents. On my other side of the family is the Vincents. So I guess more or less I'm related on two aspects of the original descendants of Mossville.

MUNGIN: And who are the original descendants of Mossville?

PAYNE: [02:56] As far as I know it was the Mosses, Braxtons, Rigmaidens, Vincents, and LeDoux.

MUNGIN: Okay.

BILL SHEARMAN: LeDoux family?

PAYNE: [Agrees] My . . . According to Dad, my great-grandmother was a LeDoux. And apparently she owned some property in that two hundred acres that Sasol has negotiated to buy forty some acres from.

SHEARMAN: Yes ma'am.

PAYNE: I was told she has nine plats of land in there.

SHEARMAN: Good for you.

PAYNE: [03:24] Yeah.

MUNGIN: So when you moved to Mossville you were eight years old. What is the earliest memory you have of Mossville? Like what was that earliest memory?

PAYNE: Playing up and down Old Spanish Trail when it was about maybe six and a half, seven foot wide, only one car could go down on the hard surface at a time. And you met you met someone from the opposite direction, you had one set of tires on and one set of tires in the gravel.

MUNGIN: So how did Mossville look at that time?

PAYNE: Very green. Quiet. Neighborly. You could play in other neighbor's yards and there was no problem. If you got into trouble in that neighbor's yard, you got a spanking there, and when you got home you found out that there was one waiting for you there, also.

MUNGIN: [04:18] So the Prater Road is named after your great . . .

PAYNE: Grandfather.

MUNGIN: Your grandfather.

PAYNE: [Agrees].

MUNGIN: Was it . . . Was that road already named after him when you guys moved there?

PAYNE: Yes. That road at one time was nothing but a dirt road. And every time we would have a hard, hard rain it would flood. So a group of kids would always get out in the middle of the street with their shoes off and go wading playing in the water.

MUNGIN: So who were your neighbors at that time?

PAYNE: In my grandmother's property on Prater Road it was the Hartmans, and let's see . . . oh, I'm trying to think of . . . I can see the ladies name there on the corner . . . Moutons. The Moutons, the Hartmans, and then a little farther down was the Gasaways. And then you got to later the Montgomerys, and then there was the old Paradise Club that was located on the left just before the railroad track if you going in that direction.

MUNGIN: What's the Paradise Club?

PAYNE: [05:24] That was a night club. That was the spot when say, the generation before me, we didn't go there. I didn't go there very much. And I lived oh, basically about a quarter of a mile . . . Where Smith Road is, that was my uncle's property. Ava and Leo Prater. And they had a rent home . . . A rent house on their property also. And my parents stayed there until they built their home on Moss Avenue, some sixty years ago.

MUNGIN: Okay. And when did your parents build the house?

PAYNE: I was roughly about probably ten-ish because it was built before Hurricane Audrey came through. I remember the morning after Audrey came of through looking through the kitchen window and all I saw was water everywhere. You could not see the ground any place.

MUNGIN: How did . . . ?

SHEARMAN: Did the home flood?

PAYNE: No, the home did not flood.

MUNGIN: [06:23] How did it affect Mossville and like the surrounding areas?

PAYNE: The . . .

MUNGIN: Hurricane Audrey.

PAYNE: The hurricane? Well most homes at that time were built on piers so I don't think there was hardly any flooding or anything. Some of the homes that wasn't constructed very well, they had damage to them. And people had to try to repair them the best they could. There wasn't a lot of financial resources in that day.

MUNGIN: So what did your house look like? Could you describe your property? Your family's property?

PAYNE: It was three bedrooms, two bedrooms. My parents had the front bedroom, I had the back bedroom, one bathroom off from a hall, a living room, and a kitchen. So I guess the total space at that particular time was maybe fifty, fifty-five foot long, and about forty foot wide.

MUNGIN: And did you guys have like a garden? Any yard?

PAYNE: [07:18] Mom planted flowers and at that time Dad wasn't really a gardener. He didn't become a gardener until he got probably past fifty. And then he started planting turnips, and string beans, and different things like that. And he planted those until last summer when he moved away.

MUNGIN: Was your mom a good gardener?

PAYNE: Mom didn't like gardening. Mom took care of the house. She was a fantastic cook and she kept clean house.

MUNGIN: What did she cook?

PAYNE: She makes one of the best banana puddings from scratch that you could wrap your tongue around.

MUNGIN: With vanilla wafers?

PAYNE: With the vanilla wafers, and the homemade custard pudding, and whatever. And she's a fantastic potato pie baker. Those are two of her specialties.

MUNGIN: [08:05] Did she pass that down to you?

PAYNE: She tried, but without any success [laughs]. My first pudding after she gave me the recipe, you would take a spoon and it would just drip off from the spoon [laughs].

MUNGIN: That's exactly what happened with me and my mom.

PAYNE: Yeah.

MUNGIN: Like she'd try to tell me and I was like . . . It became soup.

PAYNE: I know. I know. Wasn't good at all.

MUNGIN: What church did your family go to?

PAYNE: [08:27] My father's family went to Mount Zion, which is the oldest church in this area. And my family went to a church that was a branch of Mount Zion, which is Willow

Springs. Mount Zion is a hundred forty plus years, and Willow Spring is a hundred five years old.

MUNGIN: Do you know why the church . . . Why they split off?

PAYNE: Because my Vincent side of the family lived in the Willow Spring area and that was . . . Dad married into the family. So eventually Dad migrated to Mom's church.

MUNGIN: Okay. And who were some of the leaders in the church?

PAYNE: Dallas Moss . . . Oh, God why can't I think of his name? Jim Johnson. And they were some . . . And Ervin Perkins. They were some of the early leaders. And at Willow Springs there was a Walter Smith, and Joe Vincent. Walter Smith and James Moss I think were kind of wealthy at that particular day and time in standing. Walter Smith had a sugarcane mill, and Jim Moss apparently had a mill or something that he ran, and then later the post office that he kind of sublet to someone else. We didn't know that term at the time, but that was what was going on.

MUNGIN: What happened to the mills?

PAYNE: [10:03] Eventually I guess it just closed down with modernization. Times changed.

MUNGIN: Like what year . . . Like what timeframe was that?

PAYNE: The sugarcane mill that Walter Smith operated phased out probably when I was about four or five years old. And the reason I say that was, he kind of became like my pal because I was the oldest grandchild on that side of the family and sometimes he would take me to go to what was called his “branding pen”. And brand cows, and feed his horses, and whatever. And I remember walking along his old mill. And then on this end of the retrospect, I can more or less remember just church services and whatever. But there was an old, old resident called Pete Moss at the time that lived in what we would call today a shanty. And I guess he was very happy and content. He had a lot of dogs. His wife name was Virginia. And he would travel back and forth by wagon. And I was just a little girl at that particular time. Probably twelve years old at the oldest. Twelve, thirteen at the most, see. And it just so happened that the property that my home is sitting on, I purchased that from, I think his brother, or one at least of his ancestors.

MUNGIN: Oh, wow.

PAYNE: Yeah.

MUNGIN: [11:30] Where did you go to school?

PAYNE: I went to school at two basically different places. There was an elementary school in north Sulphur called Willow Springs. It was a two room school that had very high windows over it. And it taught grades like probably one through four something another. And then after we moved to Mossville, on probably close to this site was two structured buildings. One had the elementary probably through grades four, and then probably five and six was in the other

building. And Mrs. Verly Mae Washington was the principal at the time. And then when Mossville opened in '55 we all transferred to that, and Ms. Washington became assistant principal to Principal Armstrong.

MUNGIN: [12:24] And Principal Armstrong, was he a community leader? Being the principal?

PAYNE: Yes he was. He also lived in this community, not too far from where my home is now. They had purchased a home, he and his wife Ethel, and they had one son. And they lived there, so therefore he became a part of the community and not just the principal, you see.

MUNGIN: Okay. Who were your favorite teachers at that school?

PAYNE: Ava Prater, my aunt. She was a home ec teacher. Didn't like being in a class at the time at all because she was a stickler. If it was a five eight seam, it had to be a five eight seam. And Gloria Rogers, who was Gloria Kilgore at the time, she's still alive. And if I can quote her right, "The moving finger writeth upon the wall, and having written, moveth on."

MUNGIN: And moves on.

SHEARMAN: Nor all your piety, nor your tears, can erase a line of . . .

PAYNE: [13:24] Right.

SHEARMAN: Do you know where it's from?

PAYNE: [Agrees]. Omar Khayyam.

SHEARMAN: The Rubaiyat.

PAYNE: The Rubaiyat. Yeah. So what she was telling you is, if you didn't get it together it was going to move on without you [laughs]. And she's still alive today going strong. Yeah.

MUNGIN: And what year did you graduate?

PAYNE: I graduated in 1962.

MUNGIN: [13:44] And did you decide to go to college?

PAYNE: I went to college, and this is quite embarrassing, at the University of Lafayette with one of my classmates, Curtis Jean Pipkins. And at that time I was so in love that my boyfriend, Wilfred Payne, and Ralph January would come to Lafayette to visit us the weekends that we didn't come. Needless to say, I flunked out big time [laughs]. I flunked out big time. So after I married Wilfred and saw the need for an education, that's when I went back to school and became a nurse.

MUNGIN: Oh, nice. When did you become a nurse?

PAYNE: I became an L . . . it was in California. An LVN in 1972 I believe it was, '71 or '72. And we stayed there eight years and then as . . .

MUNGIN: Which part of California?

PAYNE: Los Angeles.

MUNGIN: [14:52] Okay.

PAYNE: West Los Angles. And I worked at some of the biggest hospitals there: Cedars Sinai, Hollywood Presbyterian, Kaiser Permanente . . . Did a little psych . . .

MUNGIN: I was born in Hollywood Presbyterian.

PAYNE: You were born in . . .? Yes. And then we moved back here. And the reason we moved back here was we looked at homes in California and all of them were forty and fifty years old and they were asking a small fortune for it. And we decided that we could move back here and build a home cheaper. So we built a home that was basically 2700 square foot under the roof and it only cost us about forty-five thousand dollars.

SHEARMAN: Here in Mossville?

PAYNE: [15:34] In Mossville.

SHEARMAN: What year was that?

PAYNE: [15:36] In '78. We paid a contractor by the name of Fontenot to lay the foundation and . . . you hear my tummy? I hadn't ate . . . Had lunch today. And do the blocking us in. My husband and his father Wilson Payne and a man by the name of Sims did all the brickwork. A teenager that was in high school by the name of Paul Gradney, and we call him Bucky, but he's a Prater. Dad's nephew and I, we put up all the sheetrock. All the paneling. And Dad and an uncle of mine that's deceased, [Elfie?] Dixon, they cut all the molding and whatever else. We only hired a contractor for . . . To frame us up. And a friend gave us a discount doing the plumbing and he lived right across the street on . . . Two streets over. A Mr. Charles. And Leon Murray, who's deceased, did our electrical work. My goal is to try to redo the same thing at not too much of an increasing budget.

SHEARMAN: You sold that home there?

PAYNE: Not yet, no.

SHEARMAN: Are you still in it?

PAYNE: I'm still in it.

SHEARMAN: Okay.

PAYNE: [16:52] Yes. I also have in that . . . In my home, a pew from Mount Zion Church that's a hundred years old.

SHEARMAN: How did you steal that?

PAYNE: A lot of people don't like old things.

SHEARMAN: Really?

PAYNE: So they get rid of them.

SHEARMAN: Is it cypress [?]?

PAYNE: It probably is. I love old things. I have my great-grandparents' old RCA crank . . .

SHEARMAN: [Seventy-eight?]

PAYNE: [17:19] Yes. Yes.

SHEARMAN: Good for you.

PAYNE: Doesn't work, but the frame looks good [laughs].

SHEARMAN: Nobody knows better.

PAYNE: And I use it for a piece of furniture. Yeah. Definitely. And then back to my schooling, so I was roughly forty-two years old and I went back to college in Texas and became an RN.

MUNGIN: Cool. What were some of the most important places in Mossville? Like while you were growing up, and like even now?

PAYNE: [17:44] The swimming pool. When it was summer we could all hang out there. Once we got our chores done, we were free for the rest of the day. There was a little place farther down just before you get in the bend of the curve called Ms. Martill's. She was a Braxton. Okay. And it was like a little canteen. Kids could hang out there. Also right across the street, later Ms. Lula Lyons had a little canteen and we could hang out there. So those were some fun spots.

MUNGIN: Where was the grocery store?

PAYNE: [18:22] Ha! Well, later probably mid-50s on Prater Road there was a white family that moved there by the name of Rougeau. They had a grocery store. And before that there was a little store right on the other side of the railroad track farther down. He was a Garrett. Ira Garrett. He had a little store. Then sometimes later, the same man Smith that I was telling you about. Walter Smith. He had a son that had a service station just a little bit past Prater Road. And they would have like chips and different things like that that you could get, but, in order to make

groceries when I was a child, every Saturday rain or shine, my grandfather Earthy Prater would saddle up his horse, or hitch his horse to a wagon, and he would travel from Prater Road to Westlake and I'm trying to think of . . . was it Managan? Krauss & Managan or something?

SHEARMAN: Yes ma'am.

PAYNE: Okay. The grocery store over there, and that's where he would purchase groceries. By that time, Dad had a car. So there was a little plaza that was in Maplewood, and there was an A&P grocery store. Now, this was in the 50s. And Mom and then would make groceries from there.

MUNGIN: [19:44] So we've heard some things about voter registration in this area. Do you have any memories of that?

PAYNE: No. I don't because if there was a problem with voter registration, it would have probably come the later 50s and early 60s. And at that time, I didn't really have too much of a problem. I registered to vote as soon as I could register to vote. And I was working at Saint Pat's as a nurse's aide, so I got around quite a bit. I didn't experience that. Maybe some people did. And then when a lot of the other took place with the marches and everything I had already moved to California by that time. So I missed out on some of that. There may have been some, but I'm not aware of it.

MUNGIN: Okay. So how has the community changed from when you grew up, and then you ended up leaving, and then coming back? Like during those transitions?

PAYNE: [20:40] When I came back, there wasn't that much of a change. It was still the friendliness, it was still the neighboriness, and whatever. But as others began to come into the area, and I guess families began to grow up, and I can only say that in reference to basically my own family. Like Mom had three sisters and one brother. Well, their brother died at age fifty and Mom and two of her sisters live within a two and half block radius. And my other sister still stayed in the Willow Spring . . . Aunt still stayed in the Willow Spring area. Well when we were growing up, there was always picnics. Like at Fourth of July, or we'll get together for Christmas, or we'll do this, or we'll do that. And the family was really close knit. But I think as the children began to grow up, starting with my generation, and the need to do other things, get involved in certain civic activities, your job, and whatever, it pulls the family closer apart. Today, for instance, with my cousin passing. Now, I hadn't talked to my cousin probably in two to three weeks prior to her hospitalization. But we're the type of family that we know when there's a need, we're there for each other. And I think that happened to the community at large. Everybody just kind of pulled away from each other and kind of started doing their own little thing and whatever else. And then some of the people moved away to different areas and whatever. So we lost that cohesiveness.

MUNGIN: [22:22] Last three questions. What does home mean to you?

PAYNE: Home is a place of security. A place where one should be able to be themselves whether it's good, bad, or indifferent and still be accepted. A home is a place where someone knows without a doubt that they're loved unconditionally. It's a safe haven.

MUNGIN: Is Mossville home for you?

PAYNE: It was that way until probably the last six to twelve months. Probably. I'd say.

MUNGIN: What does community mean to you?

PAYNE: [23:04] A place where a group of people may not all have the same interests, but there's an overall goal that they work for. Whether it's everybody keeping their yard up, or most people belonging to some type of church or something another. You have some of the same values.

MUNGIN: Is that still present today here?

PAYNE: No.

MUNGIN: When did that go away?

PAYNE: And it didn't totally have to do with I don't think the plants. I think it was just something that evolved over time. Yeah.

SHEARMAN: Do you think the population wouldn't have been diminished had . . . even with the plants here?

PAYNE: [23:49] I am not sure. That would be a hard question to answer. It would. Some people moved away after they graduated from high school to go to different areas, so that was a loss within itself. Some did come back, some remain here, and I can't really knock the plants because without the plants, the economy would not have grown as fast as it did in this particular area. So you can't bite the hand that feeds you.

SHEARMAN: Yes ma'am.

PAYNE: Yeah. That's my philosophy.

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

PAYNE: That we were here. Somewhere somehow through the next hundred or plus years if this world continues, to remember that there was a community, Mossville, and that it was settled right after slavery. And that group of people took nothing and did make something out of it.

MUNGIN: Thank you.

PAYNE: You're welcome.

MUNGIN: [24:58] Is there any last thing you would like to say?

PAYNE: I'm just very glad that this history is being processed because that way maybe my grandchildren didn't get something that I tried to teach them, or something that I missed, that they can go back one day thumb through the pages, or look on the screen, and say, "I didn't know this took place." And it will mean that we mattered.

MUNGIN: Thank you.

PAYNE: You're welcome.

MUNGIN: Alright. So that concludes our interview.

[25:35]

[End Tape 4419. End Session I.]