

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEES NAMES: Dolores D. Parker

COLLECTION: 4700.1688

IDENTIFICATION: Ninth Ward resident since 1949, public school teacher for 32 years;
Hurricane Betsy survivor

INTERVIEWER: Nilima Mwendu

PROJECT: Hurricane Betsy

INTERVIEW DATES: December 2, 2003

FOCUS DATES: 1949 - 1970s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3342, Side A.

Born in Bayou Goula, Louisiana; father was Methodist minister, traveled all over Louisiana with parents and younger brother; other three siblings much older; enjoyed moving around the state; especially enjoyed three years in Bastrop, Louisiana, discovering country life; wanted to go to high school in New Orleans, so stayed with an older brother in the Seventh Ward while parents still in Bastrop; parents came back to New Orleans, then went to Algiers; Parker moved with them to Algiers, but crossed river every day to finish at Clark High in New Orleans; Clark was formerly white school, given to blacks in 1950; high school football games played at Dillard or Xavier stadiums; not allowed in City Park due to segregation; venues for Clark graduation ceremonies; father vetoed Parker's wish to attend college at Howard University; got BA in elementary education from Dillard; taught for thirty-two years; blacks only had four high schools in New Orleans in '50s; first year teaching job at McDonogh 42 in Seventh Ward; taught three years at Couvent, then got pregnant with first child; had four children, Raymond, Raynelle, Raynette, and Raynard; got job at Lawless Elementary; taught at Palmer Elementary for two years; returned to Lawless, taught there until retirement in 1991; sudden decision to retire at age fifty-five; children used to behave better and parents used to participate more; never took leave or sick days for herself, just for her kids; served as Scout leader; coached girls' athletics; used to be more organized, interesting clubs and activities for children; now too much emphasis on testing; husband was brother of a good friend; husband was from Lower Ninth Ward; when first married, lived on Third Street in Uptown New Orleans; moved in with Dolores' mother in Pontchartrain Park; husband got post office job; husband went to Southern, got a degree in accounting; started own accounting business; she and her husband divorced, Dolores raised children by herself; had monthly roundtable discussions with her teenaged children to discuss the bills and their needs; in mid-70s kids worked at Pontchartrain Beach; youngest child was a few years behind the others, a loner; kids contributed part of each paycheck to the household; Dolores held onto these

contributions, distributed money back to kids when they needed it; girls were majorettes, Zulu Maids, and in Delta Delta Delta sorority; Dolores worked three jobs, so her children did the housework; ran tutoring program in afternoons; community school taught adults reading and vocational skills; program stopped after about ten years; oversaw teenagers tutoring younger kids; third job was as PBX operator at Holiday Inn on weekends; didn't take vacation for ten years; father built Dolores' present house in 1953; father bought empty lot next door to his nephew, drew up plans for house; Dolores has lived in house since 1954, except for first year of marriage when she and husband rented Uptown apartment; neighborhood back in those days: "It was families. Wasn't no transient, no people moving in and out."; used to be lots of kids in the neighborhood; people watched out for each other's kids; streets were dirt, Claiborne was a canal; physical description of area: levee, river, pre-Claiborne Avenue Bridge; didn't get sewage system in neighborhood until bridge built; when first moved into house, had septic tank; Ninth Ward developed later than the rest of New Orleans; didn't want to move to Ninth Ward, but later considered it "God's country"; cordial relations among neighbors; awaiting Hurricane Betsy, readying the children; realizing the water was rising in the night; neighbors calling to warn her to evacuate; water got into the house about two o'clock in the morning;

Tape 3342, Side B.

Family starts putting belongings up high, hoping they will only get a few inches of water; water kept rising, took kids to neighbor's house, which was higher; water higher than windowsill, kids floating around on mattress; "I had four old people, my mama and my three cousins over there. I had four children. None of us could swim. I couldn't swim."; stayed in the water until the next afternoon; waving white handkerchiefs to get attention of passing helicopters; rescued by men from yacht club; boat took them to meet Red Cross truck, which delivered them to Washington Elementary School; "the people that lived on Deslonde Street say it look like a tidal wave. And they heard a boom!"; speculation about where the levee was broken; when water settled, it was halfway up Dolores' walls; distribution of flooding in area; brother who lived in Gentilly came looking for them on his bicycle; intake process at Washington School; makeshift morgue set up under Claiborne Bridge; couldn't return to their neighborhood for two weeks because water wasn't draining; several inches of mud inside house, as well as water; cleaning out the house after flooding; lost everything; irreplaceable things she lost; packed insurance papers and house papers and took them along when evacuated; after cleaning up damage, stayed with brother for a month while house dried out; Red Cross gave more help to people who needed it more; had to get SBA loan for furniture and house repairs; standing in enormous lines to ask for help; life without furniture: sleeping on the floor, standing around a card table to eat, ironing clothes on an old board; trying to get proper records in order so kids could enroll in Hardin School; Lawless closed by flood; attending school in shifts; speculation on whether levee purposely broken to save business district by flooding Ninth Ward; flooded by salt water, which ruined the cars; car still worked, but had to stop and start it by connecting or disconnecting battery cables; son Raymond's memory of flood, backyard looked like lake; "I'm glad I was seven. If not, I would have panicked"; repaying the loan, \$1700 forgiveness; strains of staying with brother's family for a month; fixing up house after flood; brother, cousin and uncle did the labor to fix the house; place where wall was busted in when rescuers did house to house search; significance of Betsy in their lives: "It sent me back to church"; men came back to neighborhood first, to protect houses from looting; had to get typhoid immunization shots before allowed back into neighborhood;

story of baby who was left behind in flooded house and survived; had house raised up after Betsy; some people in neighborhood were charging to take people out of flood on their skiffs; whole neighborhood has stayed put through later storms; storms are okay, it's the water that's trouble; keeps closer watch on TV now when storms are coming; evacuated to Holy Cross during Hurricane Camille in 1969; lesson from Betsy: "We learned to keep food packed, water packed, clothes packed. All the important papers in one little, and when it's time to go, we gone."; Dolores and Raymond are both convinced levee purposely busted during Betsy.

TAPES: 1 (T3342)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 34 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 91 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Correspondence, Interviewee questionnaire

RESTRICTIONS: None