

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Barbara Smith Baker Brown

COLLECTION: 4700.2367

IDENTIFICATION: Thibodaux, Louisiana resident, first African American woman to run for mayor of Thibodaux

INTERVIEWER: Beverly Baker

SERIES: Louisiana Sea Grant Coastal Change Oral Histories Project

INTERVIEW DATE: November 3, 2012

FOCUS DATES: 1950, 1986, 1987

ABSTRACT:

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Full name is Barbara Baker Brown Smith; born in New Orleans, Louisiana January 21st; 1950; lives in Thibodaux, Louisiana and has lived there for six years; mother of eight, grandmother if thirty-seven, great-grandmother of three; Used to visit the country of Thibodaux at her grandmother's house; remembers a lot of sugar cane fields, and the Frost Top they would always go to on their way to Labadieville; Thibodaux was much more rural then; Brown was raised in Chicago from the age of three until she was 32; returned to New Orleans and Thibodaux to raise her children; now in Thibodaux there are a lot of stores and hotels where there used to only be sugarcane fields; in Labadieville at her grandmothers' house she used to play in the sugarcane fields near the bayou and chase the chickens and hogs; didn't know a lot about Louisiana bayous or ecology because she lived in Chicago; she was a city girl so she didn't fish with her family, thinks the coast and environment of Louisiana has changed quite a lot; right now we're being eaten away; every time a storm comes it tears up a lot of Louisiana so we may be in the water again because we are an island; every hurricane they have they lose quite a bit of land, marsh; they try to put it back, but she doesn't know if it's working or not; hopes so because she's not leaving; the production of animals now was banned, no one has farms or pastures anymore; now you have to go to the store to buy what you want; thinks the winters now are colder and the summers are hotter, as well as more storms; the hurricanes are getting more ferocious; harder to save your stuff from them now; the coastline now compared to 40 or 50 years ago is gone; it's not there; the barrier islands are all but gone; the water is eating away at the land; Brown has always liked politics but never in a million years thought she would even try to run for mayor; watched the mayor at the time, Warren Harang, and he was not doing what needed to be done for the education and welfare of Thibodaux children; had eight children and decided to run for mayor; wasn't rich but her family put a lot into her campaign; ran against Harang in 1986 or 1987 the first time she ran; didn't even think about being African American woman; she was running for the people and by the people of all people; in her family she has all colors, people are

people; proud to know that she could stand for all people and not just her people; the children were what was important; was surprised to learn she was the first African American woman to run; only campaign slurs she experience were from another African American woman who thought she should be running in Brown's place; there was an event when David Duke came down to have a forum session at Thibodaux High; was cut short for fear of a fight breaking out; all the councilmen got into a confrontation in the hallway; didn't get to speak that day because of that; for politicians today it's all about money; it doesn't matter who can or is doing the job, people are figureheads now for passing money under the table; politicians today go in saying they will do one thing and do not do it; everybody's important; black, white, yellow, anybody and everybody pays taxes and they should be heard, respected, and able to go to any councilmen or politician to get the point across or get something done about it; so right now with this money issue about Louisiana, they're taking more than they are giving; we have to be careful of if they are real or not; she was not elected mayor but if she was she would have focused on programs for children to educate, occupy, and keep them out of bad things; without a mentor telling you you are good enough, most people fail; south Louisiana politicians need to be doing their part to preserve Louisiana's coast; there is so much history in South Louisiana that it needs to grow and stay; every time a disaster happens everyone wants to leave, but nothing will get done if everyone is gone; the main issue is money and people taking the money; we need to teach this heritage to the children; the music is the most important thing; Brown's people were French Creole and they have Zydeco music; Zydeco is the most important thing for the French; music brings us all together; there is no color in music, only love; if she could run for mayor now she would push policy makers to do as much as they could to keep the water out and the wetlands in; plant more trees, especially Cypress, to help prevent erosion; all she did was try to run a positive race and make sure everyone was spoken for; she wanted to make sure no one thought she was running for only *her* race; not winning was fine with her though, because if someone has more education on what they're doing, they're going to win; she thinks if she had won it would have only been because of color, not because she was educated about being a mayor; just put her head in the ring hoping to get a better mayor; didn't think she would win, or get so many votes; was very concerned with helping children and keeping them off the street; five of her children were locked up at some point; they had nowhere to go and no one to supervise; she was a shy person; never wanted to speak or spoke anymore because she wasn't well-educated, but she gave it her best; Brown got a lot of respect from people for running for the rest of her life; being a person that has no education, or not a lot of money, and getting up to challenge something as big as that, she was well paid and well blessed just to try because the challenge was great; for the future of her community she hopes to get a learning/community/youth center built on one of her pieces of property;

TAPES: 1 (T4292)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 33 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 21 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: None

RESTRICTIONS: None