

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: John Cooksey

COLLECTION: 4700.2766

IDENTIFICATION: Ophthalmologist; Republican member of the United States House of Representatives for Louisiana's 5th congressional district (1997-2003)

INTERVIEWER: Trenton Jones

SERIES: Louisiana State Medical Society

INTERVIEW DATE: September 24, 2016; June 29, 2019

FOCUS DATES: 1960s-2019

ABSTRACT:

Session I

Tape 4745

Introduction; born August 20, 1941 in Alexandria, Louisiana; family background; names of grandparents; paternal grandfather came from Louisiana to manage Louisiana Central Lumber Company; before attending medical school, his background was in timber; lived in Georgetown, Louisiana, until age three, then family moved to Caldwell Parish until Cooksey was thirteen; moved to Olla, Louisiana, where Cooksey finished high school; early schooling; wanted to go into military, but mother wanted him to go to college; grew up admiring soldiers in movies; brother lives near Jena, LA and is in lumber business; brother-in-law is a chemical engineer; went to LSU as undergraduate in pre-med; working as a dorm proctor in North Stadium and South Stadium to pay his way through school; no standards to attend LSU, many dropouts; freshman roommate, whom he ran into again decades later; track career as high hurdler in high school; "After one semester of pre-med, I knew I could not be a high hurdler for LSU and make my grades to get into medical school."; joined Lambda Chi fraternity, but wasn't very active in it; parents' education; mother's education and job as guidance counselor at Cooksey's high school; father's education; Cooksey had 45 students in his high school class; going to LSU Medical School; had a scholarship in high school; there weren't many scholarships until after Sputnik; started medical school in 1962; Cooksey was well prepared in English, biology and physics, but struggled with algebra; mentions his favorite algebra and chemistry teachers; during medical school, lived in the same apartment on Bank Street off Tulane Avenue for four years; his old apartment building was razed and land incorporated into LSU Medical Complex; mentions other medical students that lived in the same apartments; mentions standout teachers; Tulane students got one of the highest biochemistry scores on national exam, thanks to demanding class; his previous undergraduate studies in biochemistry also helped him; describes the Embden-

Meyerhof pathway for carbohydrates; changing views on fats and carbohydrates; memories of his cadaver team; dissected two cadavers freshman year; started in bottom third of class, but moved up to top third by senior year; enjoyed the camaraderie and supportiveness of medical school; advances in medical school technology; had a student job as a phlebotomist; worked at Touro Infirmary in the summer of 1964, which influenced him to go into a surgical specialty; before that, he wanted to be a pediatrician; during a grueling internship, he decided to pick a specialty with better hours: "That's how I ended up in ophthalmology."; did internship at a Charity Hospital in Shreveport; the Charity Hospital system was excellent for learning a lot and taking responsibility; decided not to work in orthopedic surgery because the orthopedic surgeons were difficult to deal with; mentions the great cardiovascular surgeon Michael DeBakey, who was at Touro Infirmary before moving to Houston; was accepted at all the ophthalmology residencies he applied to, perhaps because his military service was behind him; chose residency at Ochsner in New Orleans, working under a Johns Hopkins graduate; started his three-year residency in October 1969; part of his residency was spent in Monroe; volunteered to serve in the air force from 1967-1969; had a relatively pleasant military experience serving as a flight surgeon in Thailand and learning to fly; his service was part of the Berry Plan; duties of a flight surgeon included both medical and flying; only three out of 75 students in his flight surgeon class were killed in Vietnam; his RF4C squadron did reconnaissance; poor view of Lyndon Johnson's leadership; later visited North Vietnam while serving in Congress; met people doing cataract surgery in Hanoi; views on past wars; views on 9/11 and current war on terror; use of medical background while in Congress; mentions another LSU grad who was an air force flight surgeon; after military, Cooksey planned to move to Colorado; instead, his father got prostate cancer so Cooksey settled in Monroe to stay close; new cataract removal technique developed by Dr. Charles Kelman; removing cataracts in Huehuetenango, Guatemala; Cooksey was the only ophthalmologist in Louisiana using the new cataract phacoemulsification technique; soon Cooksey had a high-volume practice with people coming from surrounding states; Cooksey is still performing surgery at age 75; new eye surgery technology and diagnostic equipment has made procedures much quicker; getting involved in politics: "In 1975, there was a crisis in healthcare because the plaintiff lawyers decided they wanted to make money suing doctors."; work on House Bill 1465 about medical malpractice law; Cooksey was supporting a different bill than Louisiana State Medical Society was backing; assembling a team to support the bill, which passed; key players included Donald Palmisano, Mary Lou Winters and Shady Wall; convincing legislators to support bill, voting 33 to 1; having lunch at governor's mansion with Edwin Edwards; names people present at that lunch; Palmisano and David Carlton were the spokespeople for the bill; the bill limited doctors' liability; that limit still stands; describes a recent test case involving a nurse practitioner; bill also established the patient compensation fund; Indiana Senator Adam Benjamin, Junior wrote the bill; Benjamin came to Monroe to consult with Louisiana doctors; doctors all pay money into the patient compensation fund, which is there in case a doctor gets sued; problem of getting doctors to testify against each other; explains medical review panels; covertly attending a trial lawyers meeting in 1975; Cooksey heard about the Indiana bill on a radio program and asked for a copy; altered the Indiana bill with whiteout and dropped it into Baton Rouge legislative process; before the bill limited liability, Louisiana doctors wouldn't do certain procedures for fear of being sued and losing their practices; some doctors "went bare," i.e. had no malpractice insurance; mentions major medical malpractice insurance companies of the time; some insurance companies were leaving Louisiana; many states still have medical malpractice legislation modeled after the Indiana law; state

medical society needed a lobbying team, because doctors were too busy to have to do it themselves; opinion of LAMMICO; still loves practicing medicine; names and brief bios of his three daughters and their families and careers; has seven granddaughters; daughter in Dallas rides horses and hunts foxes; the family musical ability skipped Cooksey; wishes he could go through medical school again to learn all the new technology; also misses teaching; worked as a fundraiser for the medical malpractice legislation; Cooksey was on the original founding board of Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI); good opinion of Ed Steimel, founder of LABI; attending LABI meetings; running for office in the House of Representatives; elected to represent Fifth Congressional District; courts were about to redraw the districts; describes boundaries of the new redrawn district; term limited himself to three terms in the House; unsuccessfully ran for Senate; impressions of Newt Gingrich; Bill Clinton's impeachment; memories of being in Washington during 9/11; as a physician, Cooksey was summoned to an emergency site in case the White House or congressional offices were attacked; growing number of physicians serving in Congress; mentions his friend and fellow physician/representative Greg Ganske of Iowa; physician congressmen were asked for their opinions on certain issues; Cooksey sometimes voted against Republican position if he thought it wasn't good for physicians; because of his work doing cataract surgery in Kenya, Cooksey was asked to serve on the international relations committee; between his committee work and his medical practice, he traveled to many countries in Africa and the Middle East; going to Syria to meet with president/dictator/ophthalmologist Bashar al-Assad; US military didn't want Syria to have laser technology, in case they weaponized it; appreciates Golan Heights wines; Cooksey was asked to be on a secret CIA committee that assessed the health of world leaders: "Our government, our president, the White House always wants to know if someone's about to die so that we can maybe position ourselves to have some influence over who's chosen as a leader at one of these countries."; Cooksey suggested that Boris Yeltsin had a personality change related to his heart surgery; however, the committee concluded Yeltsin's erratic personality had to do with amount of vodka he consumed; many world leaders come to the US to get surgery and other medical procedures, especially to Johns Hopkins; Cooksey's opinion of Affordable Care Act; also served on agriculture and veterans affairs committees; most enjoyed his time on international relations committee; opinions on Middle East politics: "That's a train wreck."; views on Kosovo War; "I probably won't say a lot about Obama's tenure in foreign affairs because my mother said if you can't say something good about somebody don't say anything."; views on Brexit: "Some bureaucrat in Belgium told the British that they had to grow their pickles in a certain length and a certain shape. They just threw up their hands and said to heck with it."; visiting places in Africa where they had Ebola, terrorism, blood diamonds; "Just to see the problems that exist in the world, as physicians we can be better legislators and better people to solve these healthcare problems."; increase of women medical students; mentions Priscilla Perry, a resident who became his long-term associate in ophthalmology; James was a better medical school student than Cooksey.

Session II

Tape 4998

Introduction; did one-year internship at Confederate Memorial Medical Center in Shreveport (now LSU Medical School); served in air force during Vietnam War; describes Berry Plan, which allowed medical students to delay military service; went to flight surgery school in San Antonio; learning about ejection seats; training simulation that involved being dragged by a

trailer and having to free themselves; spent time at Brooks Air Force Base, same place JFK was just before he was assassinated; got his pilot's license while going through flight surgery school; flying RF4Cs; comparison of planes used by military; Cooksey went on a temporary duty assignment to Udorn Air Force Base in Thailand; description of Udorn; as a flight surgeon, his main responsibility was taking care of pilots and their family members; vision requirements for pilots and crew; height limit for fighter pilot; flying twice the speed of sound; traveling across the Pacific to Guam en route to Udorn; air force "boomers" who refuel fighter planes from tanker planes; Cooksey got nervous when they flew over the demilitarized zone; CIA was active in Udorn; after assignment at Udorn, Cooksey's company flew some planes back across the Pacific; planes that could be piloted from the backseat; "That way if something happened to the guy in the front seat, the back seater could lend some help too."; KC-135 tanker planes; once glimpsed Admiral John McCain, CINCPAC commander-in-chief; when Cooksey transited through Hawaii, GIs were checked for agricultural pests, but later on in the war, returning soldiers would be searched for drugs; Cooksey would later visit Southeast Asia in both his capacities as an ophthalmologist and as a senator; today South Vietnam has a thriving economy; politicians mismanaged the Vietnam War; returned to Bergstrom Air Force Base after temporary duty in Thailand; got out of air force in 1969; got married in December of 1967; birth of first child, Karen; after the air force, two-year residency at Ochsner in New Orleans; finished up some coursework at Tulane; talks about Dr. Bob Shimek, head of the ophthalmology department at Ochsner; mentions some other doctors with whom he was in residency; changes in hospital ownership or administration; Shimek flew doctors around Louisiana in his own plane; Cooksey was an early adopter of the phacoemulsification technique, which was created by Dr. Charles Kelman in New York; taught the phacoemulsification technique to residents in Monroe; this technique has endured and is still used now; got to know Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia when he was in Louisiana explaining the National Disabilities Act; Cooksey took Scalia fishing at Grand Isle; "But he was a really down to earth guy. He was a very warm guy and he was brilliant. He was probably the smartest person that's been on the Supreme Court in the last thirty or forty years."; Scalia's views on affirmative action; teaching Scalia and some congresspeople how to cook speckled trout and redfish in Cooksey's Washington DC house; hoping Scalia wouldn't get stopped for drunk driving on his way home; Scalia was not a politician, but instead represented the people; people he invited to cook fish with Scalia; his philosophy of representing the Fifth Congressional District of Louisiana; Cooksey had a mature staff to run his office in Congress; initially served on agricultural and transportation committees; one of his goals was to improve Highway 165, which was only two lanes and insufficient for commerce in his district; succeeded in getting it expanded to four lanes; Cooksey was the first person from the Fifth Congressional District who represented that district in Congress; high opinion of Ralph Abraham, who's now running for governor; Cooksey served as vice chairman of aviation subcommittee; recounts his experience of 9/11; sent his staff home; was serving on international relations committee at this time; President George W. Bush rose to the occasion; visiting the site of the flight 93 crash in Pennsylvania, where an exhibit included wrenching recordings of passengers calling their loved ones from the plane; volunteered on six ophthalmology mission trips to Africa through his Methodist church; town of Maua, Kenya, is right on the equator and the sun causes cataracts; restored sight to many people who were blind from cataracts; a generous donor helped them build a new building in Maua that didn't leak; describes Bashar al-Assad and his father, and their control of Syria; meeting Bashar al-Assad; politics of Third World countries in Africa; Bill Clinton didn't have Osama Bin Laden killed when he had the

chance; visiting Sudan; US is now the leader in oil, thanks to fracking; “When you’re seventy-seven you need to take a back seat and let the young guys do the cataract surgery.”; merged his Monroe practice with an Alexandria practice; Cooksey still sees patients but doesn’t do surgery; wants to spend more time with family; enjoys not being on call; might do some farming.

TAPES: 2 (T4745, T4998)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 3 hours, 28 minutes
Session I = 2 hours
Session II = 1 hour, 28 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: Total = 98 pages
Session I = 58 pages
Session II = 40 pages

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: 31 digital photos

OTHER MATERIALS: LSMS Capsules Newsletter clippings ; Curriculum Vitae ; Correspondence ; 3 Journal clippings ; LSMS Executive Committee minutes ; Interviewee Notes; Obituary

RESTRICTIONS: None