

**T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection**

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Lionel Lee, Sr.

**COLLECTION:** 4700.1022

**IDENTIFICATION:** Participant in the 1953 Baton Rouge Bus Boycott

**INTERVIEWER:** Lisa Turner

**SERIES:** McKinley High School Oral History Project - Baton Rouge Bus Boycott

**INTERVIEW DATE:** June 30, 1998

**FOCUS DATES:** 1930s-1990s, especially 1950s

**ABSTRACT:**

**Tape 1508, Side A**

Lee born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; parents' names; has been in Baton Rouge for sixty-seven years; attended elementary school at Perkins Road Elementary and Reddy Street Elementary; attended McKinley Junior and Senior High; left to join armed forces; finished high school upon returning; college at Southern and LSU, earned BS in science and MA in social science, many extra course hours in library science; favorite subject is history; Lee is a pastor and community leader; is pastor at Shady Grove and Evening Star Baptist Churches in Baker, Louisiana, and St. Joseph in Baton Rouge; was student and part time worker at time of bus boycott; bus drivers in the 1950s were mostly racist; incident where a white man knocked Lee's aunt to the floor for taking a seat on the bus; hearing about Ordinance 222 that allowed blacks to take unoccupied seats near front of bus; white bus drivers who quit their jobs over allowing blacks to have those seats; Reverend T.J. Jemison's role in bus boycott; first bus boycott in US history; Lee signed up as a volunteer driver during the boycott; main job was to transport people to and from their jobs; racial makeup of bus riders was about ninety percent black; had feeling of victory that blacks in Baton Rouge were uniting around a common goal; names leaders of boycott; some white businesses secretly gave the boycott financial support; five white pastors supported boycott – all were fired by their congregations; raising funds for bus boycott; Exxon gave gasoline money; some gas stations filled them up for free if they had a boycott name tag; mass meeting at Memorial Stadium; cross burned in front of Dr. Jemison's home; Lee always felt victorious, never fearful; a few blacks were warned by their white employers not to participate; mixed attitude among whites – some ready for progress, some deep-seated racists; names leaders involved in United Defense League; United Defense League was the best organization in Baton Rouge for promoting racial harmony; Mayor Jack Christian's Biracial Committee made up of influential black and white community members; election of Joe Delpit, first black city councilman, sprang from Biracial Committee; when Lee was a boy, McKinley High School was the educational hub of South Baton Rouge; social activities in the Leo Butler Building; back

then, everything African Americans needed was available in South Baton Rouge; much safer back then, no shooting or marijuana; lots of talent and clout came out of McKinley High; had role models for all different professions in South Baton Rouge; young people would save up money to attend musical performances at the Temple Roof; football coach made his players go home by nine o'clock; wishes South Baton Rouge community now could be like it was back then; African American churches were strong in Baton Rouge, looked out for members; helped kids go to college and find jobs; during slavery, African American preachers kept the people together; preachers were community leaders; bus boycott had many consequences, including the Biracial Committee, more integrated schools and the first black councilman; bus boycott lasted only about nine days; white bus drivers quit; King's Montgomery bus boycott lasted a year and resulted in total bus integration; Montgomery was the longest bus boycott in US history; in Baton Rouge, the bus boycott was too brief to get national attention; Montgomery got national and international attention; differences between mechanics of Montgomery and Baton Rouge boycotts; praises Jemison's bravery for taking a stand and starting the boycott; Lee participated in a voter registration drive; as president of a labor union, he led a strike of the Baton Rouge Waterworks Company; won a federal suit to get back pay for black workers who'd been passed over for promotions given to whites; has been involved in civil rights his whole life; working on a program that teaches job skills to people on welfare; church-sponsored program that pays people to work for a summer in their chosen field to gain experience; Shady Grove Baptist Church has given out sixty-eight scholarships; ministry for senior citizens; sponsors a first grade class at Polk Elementary School in Baton Rouge; teaches his congregation that they meet to worship and depart to serve; program for addicts in shelter; role of the African American church is to meet the needs of African Americans; would love to see some South Baton Rouge churches get together to write grants and put up senior citizen homes and theaters; banks wouldn't want to loan money for this project; is conscious of being a good role model; tells a story about trying to handle racism gracefully when traveling with a youth group;

**Tape 1508, Side B**

Gains and losses caused by integration of schools in South Baton Rouge; black teachers got more training; when Lee was a student, teachers visited your home; lost the personal touch of education; civics teacher Mrs. Banks who told Lee's mother he should quit his night job because he kept falling asleep in class; Baton Rouge had more male schoolteachers than other places; male teachers cultivated by women principals; names some influential female principals.

**TAPE:** 1 (T1508)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 51 minutes

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** 28 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Biographical Sketch, Interview Index, Correspondence, Obituary

**RESTRICTIONS:** None