

## T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

### ABSTRACT

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Lenoria M. Ambrose

**COLLECTION:** 4700.2466

**IDENTIFICATION:** Mossville, Louisiana resident; first black woman to work for Olin Chemical Corporation

**INTERVIEWER:** Chelsea Arseneault

**SERIES:** Mossville History Project: Oral History Day & Field Interviews

**INTERVIEW DATES:** January 23, 2015; July 3, 2015; July 10, 2015

**FOCUS DATES:** 1900-1960; present day

### ABSTRACT:

#### Tape 4402, Session I

Introduction; Lenoria M. Ambrose was born October 24, 1946 in Lake Charles at Saint Patrick's hospital; grew up in Mossville, moved to Lake Charles when married at the age of eighteen; mother Gloria Jean Towner Harris; father Gradis Braxton; maternal grandfather William Arthur Towner; maternal grandmother Birdie Mae Perkins Towner; paternal grandfather Lee Braxton; paternal grandmother is [Oretha?] Rigmalden Braxton; Mossville history, original families, the area was known both as "Shoat's Prairie" and "Saprack"; Ambrose's family from an area near Vinton or Sulphur known as "Little Woods" or "Big Woods"; Homestead Act of 1862 brought several families to the area, including her great-great-grandmother Minerva Moss Perkins, who homesteaded 162 acres; Reverend Griffin Braxton, her great-great-great grandfather, also homesteaded on Evergreen Road; earliest memories include old one story school house, located where the Rigmalden Recreational Center sits now; when she was young, students had to be bussed to Lake Charles if they wanted to continue past junior high; Ambrose discusses where she grew up, refers to the home's layout as a foxtrot, or dog run house; growing up, family kept a garden and farm animals, including chickens, horses, pigs, and a cow; Ambrose still an active member of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Mossville, there is a legacy of church service in the family; all of her uncles on the Perkins' side of the family belonged to Mount Zion and served as secretaries or deacons; Ambrose attended Mossville High School, recalls several different teachers; she graduated in 1964, and was Miss Mossville; cousin opened a restaurant in Long Beach, California and named it after the Mossville zip code, 70663; restaurant featured Mossville memorabilia as part of the décor, including a photograph of her as Miss Mossville; discusses her great-great grandmother, Minerva Moss Perkins, in some detail: homesteaded land across from Highway 90, also known as Prater Road, was the first person in the community to have glass windows; churches were some of the most important places in Mossville, Ambrose lists several different denominations that were represented; Ambrose put together a book on the Towner side of the family; in 1906, they came to Mossville from Kipling, Louisiana, in a wagon;

Ambrose heart-broken to see the community disrupted, grateful that Mount Zion Church will remain; talks about what Mossville means to her, discusses the values the community emphasized; contrasts the education her grandfather received to the education children receive today; even though he only had a third grade education, it was really equivalent to a sixth or seventh grade education; he went on to become a master carpenter; Ambrose says Mossville was an example of a village raising a child; they had black-owned stores, including two canteens and a grocery store; community events were centered around the church, included dinner on the grounds, penny marches, and pew rallies; Ambrose explains many community members were farmers, or worked in the saw mills or in industry; in 1936, the first plant Olin [Olin Chemical Corporation, now BioLab, Inc.] was built in the area; end of interview.

### **T4484, Session II**

Geographic boundaries of Mossville; Mossville proper started at the railroad track and went west; there used to be a sign there that said “Mossville”; different neighborhoods; marriage; was a community of family, others started moving to the area with the construction of other neighborhoods, such as Queensboro, Bel Air and Lincoln Heights; several different churches; everyone kept their homes up, they helped each other, they cut their yards; it was a beautiful community; as more people moved into Mossville, the community changed; these people did not have the same ethics that she grew up with; community used to be attractive and well-kept, is not the same anymore; changes in the physical appearance of homes, from wood to brick; her history is Mossville, now it’s just a downer to see it; her mother was a community leader, used to be called the “district attorney”; she had an open door to the district attorney in Lake Charles, Frank Salter; Jake Rigmaiden considered the mayor, and was a businessman of Mossville; local businesses and canteens; had to go to Lake Charles or Sulphur for grocery shopping; would go to George Theriou’s, or WT Burton’s; street names; Junius named after one of the old settlers, named Lizzie Hines, formerly a Junius; wedding traditions; community gatherings, birthday parties and funerals; when she was growing up, there were three black funeral homes in Lake Charles; neighbors growing up, families included the LaTours, Vincents.; Chennault air force base was there when she was growing up; base is now an airport; schoolteacher Raynard built homes back there, people from all over the United States would rent his property; WWII, Korean Conflict, Vietnam; army used to be segregated, but Vietnam was integrated; had two distinct families—the Towner side and the Perkins side; her grandmother read her bible, was educated, and just knew things; both great grandmothers could read and write; on Towner side, had a great-great grandfather who learned to read and write at seventy-eight years old; both sides of the family emphasized education; if you shook hands, it was like signing your name in blood; the post office was in the Rigmaiden store; she has copy of history of Mossville, has two different parts; picking blackberries; church fundraisers, like pew rallies, penny marches and “womanless weddings”, where men would play all the women’s parts in a wedding; children played outside a lot; children knew their place; her grandfather didn’t believe in them working; grew up on six acres around all kinds of animals, and had a pond to swim in; they were rich in love; she was the first black woman hired in the office at Olin, and had to talk her husband into letting her work; adjusting to new work environment; diverse heritage; the first time she came in contact with segregation or felt it was when she went to McNeese State University; Mossville was a haven; stories about the Klu Klux Klan; she worked for forty years until the plant shut down in 2006, and now she works at McNeese State University; role models; her mother did the discipline in the home, but the whole community was involved with children’s upbringing and discipline; how

to behave in front of adults; popular dances and music; remembers going to a movie theater in Sulphur called “The Fox”, and they sat in the balcony because it was segregated; they would listen to Amos and Andy on the radio, but didn’t know it was white men playing black voices; talks about the Paradise Club, and while she was too young to go, she knew it was a popular venue; she discusses her husband’s values, he believed women should be “perfect in all ways”, so she was the perfect wife.

### **T4485, Session III**

History of Olin Matheson, a chlor-alkali plant where she worked for many years; main product urea, which was used as a fertilizer; also produced “bad, bad chemical” phosgene, in addition to hydrazine, which is rocket fuel; they were unionized; layoffs; working overtime seven days a week; first black woman to be on the board; benefits of being unionized; plants driving the economy; work options before the plants came to the area: sawmills, sulphur mines, farming; her grandfather a carpenter; people moving elsewhere to find jobs; family originated in Mossville, but many ended up moving to California in the late 1930s because times were hard; her mother moved to California in 1970; her father, Gradis Braxton, was the first black person to run for police juror; he was a businessman, and owned a cleaners, a grocery store, and a furniture store in Mossville; he moved to California in the early sixties; her grandfather’s mother walked from Meridian, Mississippi to DeRidder during slavery time; relationship with the Kagal family; great-grandfather made charcoal; Maplewood subdivision, built near Chennault Air Force Base, where her grandfather worked as a guard; grandfather Perkins was a farmer, and also worked at the sawmill; grandmothers were homemakers; great-grandmother would bathe and put on starched dress and earrings before her husband came home; great-grandfather believed it was bad luck to leave the house and then come back; worked hard back then; family involvement in Mount Zion Baptist Church; Griffin Braxton was the first preacher there, and Isom Perkins was one of the first deacons; Mosses, Perkins, and Braxtons some of the first families in Mossville; memories of her grandparents; cleanliness very important; the one room school; principal and teachers; grandparents’ education; father only had a fifth grade education, but taught them their times tables and fractions; everyone read the Bible, most attended church; several different churches in Mossville; church was “the hub” of the community; local businesses, including a motel; several clubs in Mossville; baseball a popular pastime; safe area to live in; recalls several murders; ghost stories one of their favorite pastimes; people born with a veil over their face were the ones who saw ghosts and could see the future; home remedies including putting cobwebs on cuts to stop the bleeding; babies with dimes on their necks for teething; great-grandmother Towner could remove warts with prayer; another great-grandmother could stop bleeding, and passed the gift to her grandson; another family member was a seer; mothers as disciplinarians; values instilled in her; mother always made sure they had what they needed.

**TAPES:** 3 (4402, 4484, 4485)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 3 hours, 12 minutes

**# PAGES INDEX:** T4402 (Session I) 4 pages

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** 134 pages, total

T4402 (Session I) 17 pages

T4484 (Session II) 56 pages

T4485 (Session III) 61 pages

**PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER:** Four photographs taken during interview, including photographs with interviewer Arseneault. Photographer Charlotte Willcox.

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Biographical data form; Interview questions (5 pgs); Correspondence

**RESTRICTIONS:** none