

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Edward Julia Lemelle Gordwin

COLLECTION: 4700.2473

IDENTIFICATION: Gordwin grew up in the historically African American town of Mossville, Louisiana.

INTERVIEWER: Jennifer Abraham Cramer

SERIES: Mossville History Project - Field Interviews

INTERVIEW DATES: January 14, 2015

FOCUS DATES: 1940s-1960s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4409

Gordwin born January 9, 1937, on the Old Spanish Trail in Mossville, Louisiana; the fifth of six children born to [Ida?] Mae Towner and Edward Lemelle; has four older sisters, Marian, Elaine, Pearly Mae, Della Bell, and a brother, Edward "Butch" Lemelle Junior, born ten years later; mother came to Mossville by wagon train in the 20s; she was from Kipling, near Sugartown; father from Leonsville in St. Landry Parish; mother's family moved to the area for opportunity; area became known as "Saprock" after shrubbery started growing on prairie land; remembers looking across Old Spanish Trail at "Shoat's Prairie" where hogs grazed; everyone helped each other; men helped raise barns and dig wells while women cooked or brought baskets of food; her mother helped everyone in the community; took her cleaning bucket and Lysol with her everywhere; mother would bring her to quilting bees or to help the elderly; memories of an elderly woman, Laura Hartman, who her mother cared for; they called her "Granny", and she used to tell Gordwin to "quit eating out of the pot" because she was going to get fat; memories of life before her brother came along; mother would take her to milk the cows and always wrapped a warm biscuit and preserves for her to eat with fresh milk; mother washed cow's udders with warm water to make the milk came down; would strain and sterilize the milk; she would eat clabber with sugar, but her sisters ate it plain because they didn't want to get fat; grandparents' origins; grandfather from Cameroon, Africa, and his mother was Chinese; mother's parents were [Irie?] Viola Potts Towner and David Duff Towner; father's mother named Marie Louis Lemelle; his family had acres of land in St. Landry Parish, but he moved to Lake Charles to do something other than farm; started working on the boulevard, running errands for Uncle Gilbert Lemelle; then worked for the Bell [later Garrison] sawmill; mother had moved to Lake Charles with her godmother and was doing housework; Mr. Bell of the sawmill thought her father a "fine looking gentleman" and made him his head butler; her four older sisters all born at the Bell's; parents met at a Sacred Heart Dance; they eloped to Orange, Texas, and were married in 1925; washing laundry at the brimstone; mother always had three rinsing tubs and saved the "bluing"

for the last water; back then, you washed everything separate; scrubbing floors and baseboards; heating up the reservoir for bath water; vegetables from the garden stored in a bin under the house; sweet potatoes would be in the oven while they were gathering greens; one year it snowed in March, and mother gathered all the sweet peas into the house; mother gave a party for the men going to serve in WWII; Gordwin got drunk from eating fruit soaked in rum; listening to war updates on the radio; around that time she remembers a man saying “Anywhere you see marshy land with a lot of pine cones and pine trees, you have lots of oil.”; father went to work for Cities Service; her husband was raised on a farm, but wanted to do something else; joined the navy at seventeen, too young in Gordwin’s opinion; he was in a battle on the Rhine, and saw “blood running from the hills”; history of Mossville area; outlaw country settled by former slaves; Gordwin’s daughters help her define community boundaries; community leaders; Mossville Elementary School; different pastors at Mt. Zion Baptist Church; she worships at home now, since her allergies prevent her from being around a lot of people; had a youth group called Sunshine Band; after the war, returning veterans were hired first at the refinery; sister had an arranged marriage to Richard Harrison Lee, who got a purple heart for saving a whole platoon; hog butchering in the fall; mother would give away a whole hog to the community; father didn’t mess with mother, she did what she wanted to do; rationing during WWII; father’s garden; mother would preserve; chores; walking to work in Maplewood; her son Charles talks about revivals and how faith healing cured him of allergies; as a child, he had to adhere to a strict diet of high starch food, and it was hard to cope with the allergies; his uncle put a clipping of his hair into a hole in the tree; the old saying is, once the child is taller than the mark, he would be cured; a man at a revival prayed for him, and after that he didn’t suffer anymore; family still practices home remedies; her daughter Candace used Clorox and Liquid Lysol to sterilize phones during the HIV scare in the 80s; grandmother Ida Mae “Big Mama” would cook for the evangelists; rooted and grounded in church; values instilled in them; story of a Catholic man who wanted to be invited to a Protestant revival; Bible study groups at Mt. Zion; favorite hymns; using an almanac; gardening by the moon; home remedies; using a fern, possibly a resurrection fern, to cure snake bite; sassafras to make tea and filé ; man used to sell root teas from his bike; father would warm sheep tallow and make the sign of the cross over sore spots; using filé on abscess tooth; branches under the bed for fever; father one of the only French people in the community; when other French families moved there, they gravitated to her parents; he was Catholic, but they were raised Baptist; going to mass with grandfather; mother took care of the discipline, “could whip you with a good courage.”; sister Della Bell took care of her, but Gordwin gave her a hard time; jealous that others getting more attention than her, and became “meaner than a junkyard dog”; opinions on death of Gerald Washington, mayor of Westlake, whose body found in Mossville shortly after he was elected; canteens; murder in the 40s; a fast woman named [Early?] Braxton shot by a man from out of town; her body left in the road all day long; sheriff Ham Reed investigated; had a male chaperone when they cleaned the man camp in Maplewood; what community and home means to her; regards to Mike Hayes.

TAPES: 1 (T4409)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 50 minutes

#PAGES: 11 page index; 110 page transcript

OTHER MATERIALS: Correspondence

RESTRICTIONS: None