

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Huber "Mickey" Smith Sr.

COLLECTION: 4700.2586

IDENTIFICATION: Born in Mossville, Louisiana

INTERVIEWER: Chelsea Arseneault

SERIES: Mossville History Project – Field Interviews

INTERVIEW DATES: October 31, 2015

FOCUS DATES: 1940s-2015

ABSTRACT:

Tape 4534

Introduction; Smith's childhood nickname is Mickey; raised by grandparents in 1940s as a small child because of his family's work and housing difficulties; Smith born March fourth, 1934, in an area of Louisiana that was sometimes considered Mossville and sometimes Westlake; attended school in Westlake; during World War II his parents moved to California and stayed there for a number of years after the war ended before returning to Louisiana; the KCS [Kansas City Southern] railroad track was the boundary between Westlake and Mossville; most people wrote their address as Westlake but he was involved in Mossville life; most of the people his age moved away for work but would come back home; he returned to Mossville in the 1950s to care for his aging mother, the changes in Mossville now are difficult to watch; Sasol [energy and chemical company] and other plants taking over but improving work and living; compares the change to World War II when people moved away; the sawmills closed; most people didn't return after the war; Smith returns for family, remembers walking from Mossville to Sulphur; the road was a single road where cars could pass at the same time then it became a two-lane road; the streets in Lake Charles [Louisiana] as still small and this prevents development downtown; more people own cars now than they did then; pioneers built Lake Charles with no thought for tomorrow; area grew after World War II because of migration and the plants; local businesses didn't want chain stores moving in; suspects local grocers were dishonest; no grocery store in Mossville, had to go to Sulphur or Westlake; William T. Burton was a business owner in Lake Charles and Sulphur who owned the Calcasieu Marine National Bank; Smith grew up on Old Spanish Trail in a three-bedroom home; his parents had a garden, they traded produce they grew for other things at the store; streets didn't have names and trespassing wasn't considered a problem; no washing machines or dryers; during droughts they got water from a gully, Smith draws a map of Mossville area; Joy Hill was a local bar; doesn't remember any deeds or legal agreements about property; adults built homes on their parents' land; there was a school in Mossville but Smith did not attend; bathrooms were a hole in the ground with a small building covering it; water came from digging wells; water quality was unregulated; the grandparents that

helped raise Smith were William and Loney Sullivan; they had ten children including Smith's mom; Smith's paternal grandparents were the Easton's; Ross Reeves owned a sawmill where people worked in Mossville, working in the sawmill was a good job; a second sawmill was located on Highway 90; the mill left after they began to run out of trees; World War II ended and Conoco hired people who returned; a growth in industry ensued; one of Smith's uncles served in the war; people didn't talk about their time in the war much; compares Mossville then to an old Western; worked at a service station near the I-10 bridge; Smith's first job was working in the rice fields doing farm work; farm work was more prominent before the plants came; Smith was about thirteen when he started working for the millionaire W.T. Burton at a dock on the river; earned fifty cents a day; used his money to attend dime movies; theater in Westlake was segregated, blacks sat upstairs and whites downstairs; let out of school to go work in a service station at age sixteen or seventeen; owning a bicycle was important; many soldiers didn't return after the war, moved to California and New York for a better life; talked to a lady whose grandchildren have never seen Mossville or Westlake because she moved to California; some people returned during the Condea Vista buyout because they were heirs to property; the first buyout was around 1977 because the drinking water was bad; water contaminated by waste from Conoco and Vista; Smith's mother's family has always been in the Mossville area; his grandfather homesteaded; Smith is an only child; Josh and Jacob Rigmaiden were community leaders in Mossville but did not contribute anything; Ham Reed was the sheriff; they would get people out of trouble so that not everyone was punished for their crimes; during election time cars were sent to bring people to the polls; illiterate people didn't know who they were voting for; politicians told people who to vote for; things are similar now; Smith walked from Mossville to school in Westlake; white children threw eggs at them as they walked; couldn't ride the bus with white children; black people didn't say anything; the walk was about four miles; Smith did not get along with his teachers; in 1950 moved to California at age seventeen; stayed in Houston [Texas] after his mother died; there was no help or encouragement for children in Mossville; Smith knew there was a better life elsewhere; uneducated people told you what to do and followed the white folks; Smith was not into the Civil Rights Movement; slavery originated with Africans instead of white people; people in Mossville do not have the education to qualify for their jobs; Rigmaiden put up a building so black people wouldn't go to school with whites; Smith doesn't remember any crime in Mossville; some children can't be educated because they want to be street people; Smith didn't grow up with drugs and alcohol; Smith's maternal grandparents grew food but didn't market it for profit; grew greens, tomatoes, okra, potatoes, and onions; his family never went on vacation; his son is a musician; doesn't recall any professional musicians in Mossville but there were people who played; there was zydeco music on Friday nights in Mossville at Valery Montgomery's club; attended once but it was too crowded with zydeco dancing; served mixed drinks and beer; Valery Montgomery was a businessman and aspiring Mossville politician; Wes Montgomery was Valery's brother but did not own a club; the Montgomery brothers were always doing business; before Smith's time there was a post office in Mossville; James Moss was the post master; after Moss passed away no one came to take over the post office; Mossville did not live up to its potential because people were uneducated and everyone wanted to be in charge; half of Mossville is public workers; people should be elected for their qualifications; no one had enough sense to run the post office after Moss died; Mossville has a clique that withholds information from everyone else; Smith was a citizen of Mossville but not a person of Mossville; Smith doesn't believe Mossville will ever stop being cliquish; if you don't take in new members you're going to have a bunch of people that can't help you; Smith

has no fond memories of Mossville because he left at eighteen; he thinks it's strange he was asked to give an interview; he feels it's necessary to be honest about his opinion of Mossville; the next generation will get nothing out of copying their predecessors in Mossville; Smith suggests the interviewer hear his son play music; his son, Mickey, attended McNeese [State University] and plays the saxophone; Smith has two children; conclusion.

TAPES: 1 (T4534)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 51 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 62 pages

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: One photograph taken during interview at the Rigmaiden Recreational Center in Mossville, Louisiana. Photographer Kyle Tanglao.

OTHER MATERIALS: Hand-drawn map; Interview questions (3 pgs); Correspondence

RESTRICTIONS: None