

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Haki Vincent

COLLECTION: 4700.2510

IDENTIFICATION: M.D. Haki Vincent grew up in Washington, DC. His father was from Mossville, Louisiana, where Vincent moved in the 1970s. A Korean War veteran, Vincent was later active in the Black Panther Party and in the environmental justice movement in Mossville.

INTERVIEWER: Chelsea Arseneault

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

INTERVIEW DATES: March 27, 2015; July 23, 2015; August 27, 2015; March 24, 2016

FOCUS DATES: 1950s-1990s

ABSTRACT:

Session I

Tape 4430

Vincent born October 9, 1935 in Casablanca, Morocco; grandparents born in Mossville; was gofer for carpenter father and uncles, that's how he learned the trade; family taught him Mossville history; was raised in Washington, DC; drafted into military at age seventeen; chose air force; DC's nickname was Chocolate City because so many black people lived there; story of police shaking him down for money when he was sixteen; leery of white people, especially in authority; drafted into Korean War; as school child, his class collected enough papers to buy a Jeep for World War II effort; job in military was inspecting survival equipment; got married, had three children, got divorced; after military, going to school in 1960s; assassination of Martin Luther King; incident with police in DC where Vincent was shot in back, ankle and chest, and beaten around the head; turned into a court battle with police charging Vincent for assault; he sued them for 2.5 million dollars; police broke into his house in the middle of the night, tried to kill him and plant drugs; he shot back; US is an imperialist company that has trampled on African Americans.

Session II

Tape 4487

Came from family of entrepreneurs; father's side of the family from Mossville, mother's from Virginia; family land in Mossville is called Kampoff Springs; family in Mossville had post office, store, farmed and did timber work; father built a roller coaster in Mossville while in his teens; father very creative, had gift for construction; father built black community of Deanwood in far northeast DC; only saw white people when went downtown; African Americans couldn't

go to DC amusement park Glen Echo, so family built Suburban Gardens in Deanwood; had three sisters and three brothers; half-brother who looked exactly like father; getting shaken down by police in Washington, DC when he was sixteen; believes whipping children was a remnant of slavery; went to all-black school in DC that taught them nothing but bullshit; corporal punishment in school; joined air force when drafted at age seventeen; participated in Boy Scouts, found it worthwhile; construction of housing projects in Deanwood brought more white police officers who terrorized locals; psychological assault of boot camp to turn ordinary people into killing tools; knew nothing about Korean War before drafted; practicing blackout drills at home; had air raid shelter in family home; father went to construction trade school in Washington, DC; parents met in Washington; visited Morocco twice as an adult, including once while in Strategic Air Command (SAC); visited England, which he disliked; being solicited by white prostitute in England; “biggest dose of crabs”; white soldiers told white girls that black people had tails; this was Vincent’s early experience of overt racism; Vincent was responsible for inspecting survival equipment; learned to sew; hated the military, so committed acts of sabotage; fell in love with pregnant woman; attraction of pregnant women; interest in holistic health, vegetarianism; worked on President Kennedy’s yacht; marched in Washington; participated in events led by Martin Luther King, Junior; flying over DC after King assassination, could see smoke of the district burning; lack of tags on motorcycle escalated into police attacks on Vincent’s life; police shot him several times and beat his head; ambulance trip to the hospital in too-tight handcuffs; woke up in hospital to learn that his idol, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah was dead; gets emotional talking about military, cites PTSD; doctors are overeager to prescribe morphine; police are the real terrorists; Washington, DC is the true axis of evil; good feelings about Cuba; Obama doesn’t care about African Americans getting reparations; things are getting worse.

Session III

Tape 4509

Agent Orange exposure while in military caused his prostate cancer; political awareness sprang from being drafted; lied about being seventeen, really sixteen when enlisted; sabotaged military materials; grew up in Deanwood in far northeast Washington, DC; Deanwood was country – pigs, gardens, outhouses; air raid drills; sold water to next door neighbors who lacked plumbing; people crowding around tavern TV to watch Joe Louis fight; saved money for candy and movies; local street car service; amusement park in Deanwood; left doors unlocked, one night a drunk stranger wandered in and slept on couch; parents always raved about Mossville; memories of his grandfather, a farmer and carpenter; family land in Mossville stolen by Krause & Managan Lumber Company; father was naturally gifted builder who built a roller coaster and house while still in his teens; cousin Pete Moss who drove a horse and buggy; relative who worked at the Bureau of Engraving in Washington, DC; Vincent took after his grandfather, who rode a white horse and carried a whip; Vincent rode a bicycle and carried a machete, scared children; father was a Baptist who instilled morals and principles; had to go to church and Sunday school every week; later found out about half-brother two months older than Vincent’s oldest sister; father was having affair; half-brother looked just like father; became best friends with half-brother; became father’s second in command at age sixteen, the supervisor on jobs; fired older cousin for goofing off on job; involvement with Black Panther Party; looking at newspaper clippings from that time; raided his house for drugs, tried to frame him; court case where Vincent charged with assault; “I think I’m probably the only one here in this country shot a cop and got out on personal bond”; as member of Black Panther Party, he taught people how to handle firearms, self-defense

and their rights; his military service eased his entrée into Black Panthers; had two daughters and one son; son had drug addiction, died at age forty-seven; never met Angela Davis, but loved her from afar for being vocal, active and fine; recounts story of shootout involving Davis where a judge was killed; Vincent more a follower of Malcolm X than MLK; didn't believe in turning the other cheek; Black Panthers fed people and helped them stand up for their rights; toeing the government line was like being back on the plantation; made silkscreens of Richard Nixon in electric chair, popular at Philadelphia event; frequented demonstrations in DC, including those led by MLK; had a German shepherd who hated white people; kids in neighborhood who were police informers; spent five years in prison in Loudoun, Virginia; changes in outside world while Vincent in prison: milder activists and more herpes; lawyer in his suit was traitor, and jury unfair, Vincent only got \$130,000 instead of 2.5 million; lawyer trying to further cheat him out of money; recounts shooting of news reporters the previous day in Virginia; memories of protests in Washington, New York, Philadelphia and Virginia; Vincent had a Black Panther truck that looked like a paddy wagon, equipped with loudspeakers and Malcolm X portrait; Vincent got locked up in Virginia for being a Panther ringleader; story about a mysterious ghostly light on Evergreen Road; Mossville healer named Mamou who healed with herbs; his current partner is an herbal healer; she's treating his prostate cancer with plant called callaloo; road trip where he visited Juarez, Mexico and Arizona; felt deep connection to Mossville when he visited after prison; shows paperwork for his land patent for Mossville land.

Session IV

Tape 4568

Became aware of pollution and toxic spills in Mossville in the mid-1980s; start of environmental group Louisiana Bucket Brigade; people would page Vincent when they smelled something suspicious in area, he and Shirley would take a sample in their buckets and mail sample to lab in California; companies would often call police on them; dioxin and other chemicals spilled; Mossville groundwater contaminated in early 1980s; companies lied about spills; companies only talked to public after exposed by media; companies offered buyouts at sub-market rates; companies removed contaminated dirt in some places; doesn't know where they took the contaminated dirt; company advised them to close their wells and buy drinking water; since people weren't paid enough for relocation, they wound up in debt; water is still bad now but more expensive; function of Mossville water board; filed report against companies at a World Court hearing in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1999; refinery spies have raided citizens' mailboxes and trashcans; dioxin is a deadly plastic chemical; employees died from chemical exposure; poison travels home on workers' clothes and afflicts their family members; Wilma Subra's work in Mossville; Bucket Brigade founded in California; companies would panic when they saw Vincent with a bucket; companies tended to dump poison on rainy nights; explanation of specialized bucket used for sample collection; Vincent's commitment to fighting for justice was inherited from his great-grandfather Eli; chaos and fighting in community during Condea Vista buyout of Bel Air subdivision; Mossville Environmental Action Now (MEAN) dropped Vincent and Shirley for not adhering to its strategy; MEAN is a weak sellout; earlier involvement with MEAN; not sure what Bucket Brigade does with information; companies dump on rainy nights because it's harder to detect; noise of living near plants; evacuation plan is bullshit because of locked gates; environmental justice work of Debra Ramirez; house fire that killed Mossville resident and activist David Prince; companies deliberately withhold information from workers so they can't protect themselves from dangerous chemical exposure; media coverage is lightweight

because they want to stay on good side of government; companies are doing nothing significant to rectify situation; workers die shortly after retiring, so company doesn't have to pay them their retirement checks; lack of health education from plants; Edwin Edwards as symbol of Louisiana corruption; mysterious disappearance of black graveyard when Isle of Capri casino built; Valery Montgomery's involvement with Edwards; "Lousy-ana" still under Napoleonic Law; Vincent has never voted and refuses to vote for anyone; white supremacy has Obama in his pocket; disapproval of gay marriage; the struggle continues.

TAPES: 4 (T4430, T4487, T4509, T4568)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: Total – 4 hours, 4 minutes
Session I: 22 minutes
Session II: 49 minutes
Session III: 1 hour, 43 minutes
Session IV: 1 hour, 9 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: Total – 156 pages
Session I: 11 pages
Session II: 36 pages
Session III: 70 pages
Session IV: 39 pages

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: Five photos taken during interview sessions I, III and IV including portraits of Vincent, a photo of Vincent with interviewer Arseneault, and a photo of Vincent's motorcycle that he references during one interview. Photographer Kyle Tanglao.

OTHER MATERIALS: Biographical data form (2 pgs); Interview questions from oral history day (2 pgs); Interview questions from field interviews (5 pgs); Correspondence; Eli-Vincent estate plan; Copies of newspaper clips referenced during interview (10)

RESTRICTIONS: None