

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

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Miles Edward Richardson

**COLLECTION:** 4700.1503

**IDENTIFICATION:** Anthropology professor at LSU for over forty years.

**INTERVIEWER:** Jennifer Abraham

**SERIES:** University History – Distinguished Faculty & Administrators

**INTERVIEW DATES:**

Session I:	12/18/2000
Session II:	2/18/2003
Session III:	9/22/2003
Session IV:	9/20/2006

**FOCUS DATES:** 1930s - 2006

**ABSTRACT:**

**Session I**

**Tape 3054, Side A**

Introduction to interview; he appreciates being interviewed and is honored; born in Palestine, Texas, in 1932; family lived on a farm; father worked in railroad shops; he loved growing up there; he liked animals more than people; they had a cow, pigs, a horse that had a colt; the colt acted like a dog and he just loved it; they had dogs, chickens, raised a garden, farmed for corn; his father's name was Mark Carl, he was about fifteen years older than Richardson's mother, Florence Adams; brief history of his father's family's travels; he doesn't have much information on his mother's family; she was an orphan; difficulties with his father because he was so much older; he doesn't know much about his grandparents; he was named after an uncle who died in a motorcycle accident; his father could read and write but didn't like to do either; his mother had more education but didn't read much; explanation of how his father got to Palestine and bought their farmland; their first house had holes in the floor with a wooden stove for heat; father had a new house built out of stone which was unusual for the area; he visited the house recently when he was in Palestine for his fiftieth high school reunion, reminded how small the house was; railroad business was new to his father; example of people building homes in Independence, LA near the Esso plant so they would be close to work; recollections of his father talking about union struggles at the railroad shop; the railroad was the main industry in Palestine; landscape around Palestine was pine woods; people lived off the land; his mother sold eggs and that was her money; credit store where they purchased food and supplies; chicken meat was prized; they had chickens but they didn't sit on eggs well so they had to buy chicks; he hated milking the cow because she would always have poop on her; description of the barn where they kept most of their animals; their horse, Dolly, was for riding and plowing; he liked plowing; talks about the different types of plows; the horse was stubborn and didn't listen to commands; difficulty in getting the horse pregnant; when colt was born, his father named him

Seelum; Richardson loved the colt and Dolly loved it, too; explains how they would try to catch Seelum and Dolly in their pasture; he liked riding horses; riding back and forth with a friend who lived down the road; woods around Palestine good for lumbering, there was a sawmill; sawmill kids were "trashy" and lived in makeshift shelters while they worked; he rode a bus into town for school, sometimes they would pick up sawmill kids; later there was pulpwood industry in Palestine that was mainly African-Americans; talks about his mother's death when he was twelve; says his world fell apart after that; becomes convinced that he isn't saved; thinks that he doesn't believe in God; one night he knelt in the pigpen asking for God's forgiveness but it didn't come; later in his life he reads Thomas Paine and relates to his views; thinks he doesn't believe in God because he hates him; [Tape 3054 Side B was not used]

### **Tape 3055, Side A**

Joined the service to get out of high school; with the GI Bill he could go to college; thought about pursuing agriculture; his experience in the pigpen made him want to be an anthropologist to find out what religion is about; his mother tended the garden at his childhood home; she canned food and made dresses out of flour sacks; the garden was fairly large; various vegetables they grew; he hated planting sweet potatoes, it was a lot of work during a hot time of year; they got water from a well; they had electricity in their home; later they built a pump to run water into the house; never got sick on well water although he later realized the family that lived uphill would dump their sewage within a half-mile; he went to a wheat harvest in West Texas and got paid very well; he used the money to get a pump for water to the pigpen; his father didn't understand why he wouldn't just carry it; more details on the garden; planting crops by the moon; when he did fieldwork in Colombia, his surprise to see that they planted the same way; he doesn't remember the exact details of how to plant by the moon but it's something about whether the crops grow above or below ground; he had warts as a child and describes various folk remedies that he tried, all failed; folk belief that sleeping in the moonlight gave headaches; one-room schoolhouse he attended with his sister and a few other children; once he misbehaved and had to bring the teacher a switch - he brought her a pine needle and she laughed; he was teacher's pet and it embarrassed him; the next year went to school in town; recollection of Christmas pageants; parties where girls made box lunches and boys bid on them; occasionally there would be parties on someone's farm; last time he was back for his high school reunion he decided he wasn't going to visit again; things are different from when he was there in his earlier life; he joined the service with a friend in the spring of 1950; he was a radar mechanic at Keesler Air Force Base; his class was sent to Okinawa; he was homesick when he first arrived but was sad to leave two years later; wound up in Merced, California at a mobile air base; seemed to him that Cold War threat was taking precedence over Korea; after service he attended Stephen F. Austin State University, took classes in biology and history; loved his first anthropology course; didn't want to tell people he wanted to be an anthropologist because it was precious to him; his favorite class in biology was comparative anatomy; excitement of recognizing commonalities between different life forms; his current project is an article on anthropocentrism; putting humans' place in nature in context; asked his students how they can experience the universe and discusses different answers; he studied more ancient history but didn't care for it as much as biology; he and Abraham discuss plans for their next interview and what they will discuss; he got his graduate degree at Tulane; was in the LSU master's program for a year then Tulane opened their doctoral program so he went there instead.

## **Session II**

### **Tape 4019, Side A**

Introduction to interview; it “just happened” that he became a student at LSU; applied to several graduate programs; Dr. E.L. Miller, chair of biology at Stephen F. Austin, knew Dr. Kniffen at LSU and helped pave Richardson’s way; Miller and others were tolerant and helpful, he should have been more appreciative; he was a good student at Stephen F. Austin, a biology and history major there; biology background helped him to get into LSU; LSU gave him an assistantship, necessary for him because he had used up what he got from the GI Bill; assistantship paid \$100 per month; it was poor pay then and many assistantships still pay poorly now; delighted to have assistantship; story about coming to LSU from Texas, driving in a Nash Rambler, hitting a cow at the bottom of a hill; police came and told him he would have had to pay for the cow if he had killed it; took forever to get to Baton Rouge, had to add water to the radiator constantly because of damage from cow and abundant lovebugs crushed on the hood; difficulty finding a place to live in Baton Rouge; didn’t want to live on campus but no rooms available downtown; paid \$5 to sleep on the stairs in a rooming house one night; eventually found a room in a home on Convention Street; had to move to campus when the home was torn down for interstate construction; took the bus from Convention Street to campus; he was familiar with Louisiana before he came here, was stationed in Biloxi for a year, often went back and forth from Mississippi to Texas; Louisiana can surprise you with new and different things and people; LSU didn’t have a doctoral program in anthropology so he planned to just get his master’s there; didn’t have much dorm life because he had an office in a temporary building on campus; assistantship started with Dr. Haag who had him lay out boxes of artifacts from a dig in the Carolinas; introductory geography class ran out of assistants for class discussion, he was asked to help; Haag selflessly let him switch his assistantship; difficulty working with geography class when he had almost no experience; he discovered cultural geography from Dr. Kniffen; similarities between cultural geography and anthropology; strong relationship with Kniffen; determination to become an anthropologist; took many course with Haag because he was the only anthropologist; he was impressed by Haag’s knowledge; Haag and Leslie White at University of Michigan; idea of cultural evolution and discussion of White’s theories; “strange dichotomy” of cultural vs. biological evolution; idea that humans are a species like any other; Haag taught everything, other professors had extreme course loads, too; impact of professors on Richardson’s own thinking, his amazement at the cultural landscape; his early studies on the anthropology of religion; Dr. Munro Edmonson at Tulane was brilliant; recollections of his class and his exemplary teaching style; functionalist theory in anthropology; structural functionalism, theorists and importance of Freud; living on \$100 per month he “starved” and became a vegetarian because meat was expensive; he was very caught-up in his studies; LSU was different back then – mandatory ROTC so all freshman boys had their heads shaved, no black students because it was before integration; racial barriers were so present and brutal that he wonders now how we ever lived like that; Tulane may have been integrated; recollections of civil rights activities in Baton Rouge;

### **Tape 4019, Side B**

Memories of peaceful civil rights protesters and the treatment they faced; summers working with sociologist Dr. Forrest LaViolette in New Orleans studying the political activity of African American ministers; research methods they used – interviews and newspaper content analysis; Richardson interviewing people in the community; interview methods weren’t that good; learned a lot about New Orleans culture during those two summers; Catholic parishes were segregated by race; Jesus statues in New Orleans and Latin America; overall he was treated kindly by the people

he interviewed, one woman mistrusted him; went to Tulane in summer of '58, started classes there that fall; Tulane had the only anthropology doctoral program in the state; he lived on loans his first year at Tulane, then got an assistantship teaching sociology; Tulane had a combined anthropology and sociology department so there was a lot of overlap; his best friends at Tulane were sociology students; his friend Bill Harrell; another student, Valerie, who Richardson married; explanation of why Valerie was at Tulane; how he and Valerie met and why they liked each other; he would spend time with his grad student friends listening to folk music and talking about sociology; Woody Guthrie song "The Ballad of Tom Joad"; exciting time with folk music, integration happening and lots of funding for graduate students; still didn't make much money at Tulane; roach-infested house that he and Valerie lived in after getting married; they moved when their jobs improved to a house next to a cemetery; exciting time to be at Tulane when their program was just starting; support system of his fellow grad students; great working relationship with LaViolette; relationship with Edmonson wasn't as strong because he was so brilliant and was always busy; Richardson's plans for dissertation research; helping LaViolette compile studies for a grant proposal; Richardson fails to get funding for his proposed research at same time LaViolette's grant is denied; Tulane gets a grant that allows him to go to Colombia for an indeterminate time; funding from International Center for Medical Research and Training (ICMRT) studying tetanus infection in infants in Cali, Colombia; difficulties with people mistrusting the study, speaking Spanish; after completing medical assignment, starts dissertation research in San Pedro; daughter born in Cali which was difficult; hard time for him and Valerie being separated while he lived in his research community; apartment where Valerie lived with the baby in Cali, upstairs neighbors throwing lavish parties while they lived austere; feels he never got a good grip on fieldwork; Tulane didn't offer methods course so he mostly taught himself; vague ideas of how his dissertation would come together; his local assistant who would translate Spanish for him; living in the community, going to church all the time, observing people; eventual research was a community study; Edmonson's interest in communications theory; after a year and a half in Colombia, he and Valerie were ready to come home; political climate in Colombia at that time; groups of bandits robbing citizens; reminds him of America after the Civil War; tape cuts off.

### **Session III**

#### **Tape 3775 (digital recording – no sides)**

Introduction to interview; recap of previous session; Richardson enjoyed coming back to the U.S. from Colombia; his Spanish was good but he liked the ease of speaking English again; daughter was born in Cali, Colombia; had a Siamese cat they brought to Colombia and people there had never seen one before; job at Indiana State College in Pennsylvania; son was born there; came back to Louisiana in 1965 and finished his doctorate at Tulane; job market was booming in the early 60s and he had many offers; got a call from Dr. Haag at LSU asking him to come back and teach there; never adapted to life in Pennsylvania; lived on a farm the first year and it was too isolated; moved to town the next year; Raymond Lee, chair of the social science department, was wonderful to him, influential in academic affairs, had a good philosophy about picking your battles; Lee had arranged for him to be an associate professor even though he was still working on his PhD; finished writing his dissertation in Pennsylvania, difficult to do while teaching; son was born premature but made it; glad to come to LSU; people at Indiana didn't do much research, LSU was the opposite; he loves LSU and the state; his committee chair at Tulane was Edmonson; LaViolette was the department chair; he arranged for Richardson to go to Colombia; Richardson and his wife were fond of him; Richardson has LaViolette's academic robes and uses them every graduation; relationship with

LaViolette was closer than with his major professor, he was more personable and a father figure; didn't take a course on Latin American culture so he was at a disadvantage in Colombia; had to figure out what his paradigm was while he was there; did a community study; interest in material culture grew while at LSU; in the 70s, began to think in terms of place rather than community; concept of place has grown; in humanistic anthropology and geography there is a way to talk about the experiential component of place; discussion of postmodernism, idea that life is fragmentary, role of irony; he likes the postmodernist notion that meaning is endless; postmodernism says that life is a game, but he thinks it's a game worth playing and not a game to make fun of; using Derrida and Foucault's postmodernist theories; postmodernist view of what is problematic; functionalism fell out of fashion in the 60s; 70s were down period but things picked up again in the 80s and especially 90s; theory in anthropology now comes from outside the field; his strategy for teaching History of Theory; impact of Vietnam War on anthropology; functionalism disproved by Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement; American Anthropological Association meetings were rowdy during this era; conflict between AAA fellows and grad students; 70s graduates were frustrated by lack of jobs; difficulty of finding tenure-track positions and many universities' tendency to hire professors only for short periods; pressure to publish; early years of his teaching and research at LSU; medical school grant to study medical practices in Costa Rica; how much he enjoyed Costa Rica; similarities in city planning in different parts of Spanish America; student from Costa Rica who came to LSU; explanation of how he started self-financing his research and working on research during summers; discussion of importance of writing; his first experiences in writing fiction and prose; idea that structure is the most important part of a story; things have to fit in the story and people have to talk like they're supposed to; success in publishing stories, wants people to read them; different reaction to his poems; main challenge in writing is not to get pulled in to conflicts in his life that aren't in the story; stories have to be from the heart but still maintain structure and make sense; he wants his academic and fiction writing to be considered one whole body of work and not separated; many stories make the anthropologist look stupid and the native look smart, this is fine as long as it's true and is documented in the story; writing more poetry recently; the characterizations he uses come from real life; plans for next interview session; closing discussion.

#### **Session IV**

##### **Tape 4020 (digital recording – no sides)**

Introduction to interview; starting as a professor at LSU in 1965; living in College Town and then moving to Southdowns; H. Jesse Walker finds an office for him; first years were awkward because he had been there as a student; Dr. Haag was his mentor, but he felt like he couldn't talk to him about teaching or research; even after Colombia has was hesitant to speak Spanish and studied it every day; knowledge of two languages was a department requirement; awkward for Richardson because Haag thought Spanish was easy; Haag was very talented, taught many courses, was delightful, warm, and funny; remembers seeing segregated Boy Scout troops visiting LSU; few African American students there at that time; Coach McClendon recruiting black football players; people in stadium using code words for black players; feels most people were welcoming but some people didn't care for Martin Luther King; Vietnam War was starting and LSU students were still doing panty raids instead of protesting; eventual rallying of faculty and students; many English Department faculty were involved; going downtown with a colleague to see Marty Robbins perform; glad to see people beginning to protest Vietnam War; had to swear allegiance to the USA and some people refused and were investigated; English professor Nicholas Kennedy who was

investigated and certified “loyal American”; Free Speech Alley formed in 1964 or ’65, started as an anti-war protest; people would push boundaries of vulgarity there; Ted Schirmer became student government president, had served in Vietnam, first president that wasn’t from a fraternity; he pushed for homecoming queen election to include non-sorority members, students resisted, and queen crowning was cancelled; strict dress codes for women on campus; Margaret Jameson was a wonderful lady, but wanted all women to be southern belles; classes would have one or two African American students; no political correctness so people still used racial slurs; compulsory ROTC at LSU through most of Vietnam War, Nicholas Kennedy helped to have it abolished; attempt to raise flag after MLK’s death caused a scuffle; in the Geography and Anthropology Department at that time, cultural geography was big; influence of Haag and Leslie White’s theories; Richardson hid his enthusiasm for New Archaeology because Haag was traditional and took exception to New Archaeology because they accused his generation of being too scientific and ignoring social aspects; new hires in the department; end of interview.

**TAPES/RECORDINGS:** 5 total

Session I: T3054, T3055  
Session II: T4019  
Session III: T3775  
Session IV: T4020

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** Total 4 hours, 42 minutes

Session I: 1 hour, 30 minutes  
Session II: 1 hour, 26 minutes  
Session III: 1 hour, 3 minutes  
Session IV: 43 minutes

**# PAGES:**

Session I transcript: 50 pages  
Session II index: 12 pages  
Session III index: 9 pages  
Session IV index: 3 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Vita; Correspondence; Interviewer’s questions and notes; Obituary; LSU write-up; Print out of Geography and Anthropology Department Theses 1935 – 2010.

**RESTRICTIONS:** None