

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Pearl H. Payne

COLLECTION: 4700.1731

IDENTIFICATION: Educator in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana and LSU alumna; spouse of Lutrill Payne, who was the first African American to be enrolled at LSU after initially being rejected on the basis of his race

INTERVIEWER: Jennifer Abraham

SERIES: University History: Integration

INTERVIEW DATE: August 6-7, 2003

FOCUS DATES: 1920s-2000s

ABSTRACT:

Session I

Tape 3498, Side A

Introduction; interview will cover Pearl's life in Natchitoches, Louisiana, as well as at LSU, specifically about the desegregation of LSU; graduated LSU in 1956; discusses upcoming and past family reunions; great-grandparents were Lafayette and Suzanna Lawrence; grandfather Arey Lawrence was the oldest of thirteen siblings; all thirteen siblings had nicknames; Arey was nicknamed Bud; uncle Willie Lawrence, nicknamed Bubba, was the first Black supervisor of schools in Natchitoches Parish; upcoming family reunion will have six descendants from Pearl's grandfather's thirteen siblings; Pearl's mother was the oldest child of Arey; Pearl writes a family newsletter preceding family reunions with information about those thirteen siblings; family was situated in Natchitoches Parish; great-great grandparents were born into slavery; great-great grandparents gave their children, two sisters and a brother (Pearl's great-grandfather, Lafayette), land where the family lived for generations; some of the land still in the family, though some of it has been sold; the land is approximately five miles out from Natchitoches, off of Highway One; recalls visiting the land as a child when her grandfather Arey lived on it; the land was flat, originally used as farmland, then used as pastureland; family grew cotton, corn, and sorghum on the land; grandmother made syrup from the sorghum and baked it into cakes; great-grandfather raised cattle; every Saturday great-grandfather Lafayette would slaughter cattle and people would buy the meat; Lafayette slaughtered the cattle and had a group of men to take the hides off; Lafayette butchered and sold the meat at his market on his farm; mother was Addie Lawrence, the oldest of Arey's children; recalls her mother and other family members celebrating her birthdays and various family reunions over the years; brings up a scrapbook that she kept during the time that her husband, Lutrill Payne (to whom Pearl refers as "Payne" throughout the interview), was enrolling at LSU in 1951; discusses the lawsuit surrounding Payne's admittance to LSU, which predated integration; Payne applied to the Graduate School to

study agriculture; recalls her granddaughter attending LSU years later and writing about Payne's experience fighting for integration and desegregation at LSU; recalls Alexander Pierre "A.P." Tureaud Jr., the first Black undergraduate student at LSU; Pearl kept up with developments in Payne's enrollment daily, keeping a scrapbook; recalls Payne was initially welcome to enroll, but after including a picture of himself in his application, was told that LSU was for whites only; scrapbook includes newspaper clippings from *The Shreveport Times* and *The Natchitoches Times*; Payne's case was very public, frequently discussed on the radio and in the newspapers; Payne was accused of being a communist at one point; pivots back to discuss great-grandfather Lafayette again; Lafayette's house was built with one side for the men and one side for the women; the land had the main house, as well as a cabin/barn for the livestock; the main house was made of wood and raised off the ground on blocks; Lafayette and the rest of the family, as well as others in the community, built the house themselves, including cutting the shingles from trees they chopped down; Lafayette let his son Arey, Pearl's grandfather, live on the land; Arey stayed on the land until he died at age sixty-two; recalls her grandmother as a "little quiet lady" that was the head of the house; grandmother looked after the children and until they left to attend Coleman College; recalls her mother's siblings moving away, either to attend school, get jobs, or serve in the military; uncle Willie, nicknamed Bubba, served in World War I, later returned and became the first Black supervisor of schools in Natchitoches Parish; after Willie died, his land was left to his one daughter, who now lets the family use it as a cemetery; Willie's daughter moved to New York; one year, Willie's daughter brought her daughter and four grandchildren to stay with her and her husband on their farm; recalls the children interacting with the cattle, including an amusing anecdote about the little boy wanting to bring a cow back with him on the plane back to New York; recalls one of the grandchildren riding on the tractor with Payne; Pearl's parents were Emmett James Henry and Addie Lawrence; Emmett and Addie met when Emmett, originally from Texas, was working in Louisiana; father Emmett was a bookkeeper; parents married, lived, and worked in San Antonio, Texas; they moved to Louisiana, but after they split up, Emmett moved back to Texas and Addie stayed in Louisiana; Pearl was their only child; Emmett died when Pearl was a small child; recalls going to the store her father worked at and her father buying her a hat from the store's catalog; at that time, there was no high school in Natchitoches Parish; attended elementary school at Powhatan Elementary School; Pearl grew up in Powhatan, twelve miles from Natchitoches; recalls taking a train to Natchitoches to shop; still attends her old church in Powhatan; recalls her uncles picking her up on horseback to go home with them; after finishing elementary school at twelve years old, Pearl attended high school at Peabody High School in Alexandria, Louisiana because the high schools in Natchitoches were only open for white students; recalls her friends, white and Black, who still keep in touch with her; recalls the school bus picking up the white children, whereas she and the other Black children had to walk to school; at the time, she and the other young children didn't think anything of the racial inequality, though the older children understood; recalls the older children occasionally throwing gravel rocks at the children on the bus; at the time, Natchitoches Parish had sixty-six schools, scattered so that every community had a school; stayed with her aunt in Alexandria to attend Peabody High School; was unfamiliar with some of the testing methods at Peabody, such as multiple choice and true-false, since she only had essay tests at Powhatan; despite being unfamiliar with the types of questions on the tests, Pearl received one of the highest scores in the class; completed two years at Peabody; her aunt moved to California, so she returned to complete her junior and senior years at Natchitoches Parish Training School; recalls the differences and similarities between Powhatan Elementary School, Peabody High School,

and Natchitoches Parish Training School; recalls Powhatan having very few teachers; occasionally, there would be no teachers at Powhatan, so she and the other students would walk to the nearest school; does not recall when she learned how to read, though she recalls her mother buying her books; the reading primers were sold out when her mother tried to buy her one, so her mother bought her a first-grade reader to start when she was five years old; she read the book with her uncle; at the end of first grade, her teacher left without promoting the students to second grade; when the next year started, she did not have a teacher, so she and the other children went to another school, where the wife of one of her cousins was teaching; both Black and white children attended Powhatan Elementary, but there were separate buildings with different teachers; after the first two weeks of second grade, Powhatan got a teacher, so she and the other students returned to Powhatan; from a young age, Pearl always knew she wanted to teach; she worked mostly with mathematics and science; she initially taught first grade, but later spent most of her time teaching junior high level; recalls a former first grade student that she remained close to; she remained close to many of her former students, and would even go out to eat and shop together in Alexandria or Shreveport, Louisiana; recalls one student that sent her something for her birthday and said she was like a mother to him and other students; recalls receiving criticism from a white supervisor for being too "motherly" to her students; recalls an example in the 1960s in which she kept extra school supplies for children that did not have any; states her birthday for the record, July 12, 1918; attended elementary school in the late twenties, finishing in 1931; recalls living through the Great Depression as a child; being so young, she did not notice or pay attention to what her family lacked during the Depression, stating that, "What you didn't have, you didn't worry about"; recalls having to be resourceful not only during the Depression, but also in later years, particularly as a teacher; recalls an elementary school teacher telling her classmates about seeing the lights in Alexandria, as Natchitoches did not have lights at the time; tape flips to Side B.

Tape 3498, Side B

Resumes talking about people sharing what they knew and experienced with each other; recalls an education center in Natchitoches, which served people that otherwise had no way to go to college; after finishing high school, she and others went to the center, where they received curriculum from Grambling State University; she received one year of college education from the center and then began teaching; recalls working and receiving college education at the same time, only able to attend classes in the summer; recalls the chores she did as a young child; she and her aunt Lucille, who was only seven years older than she was, would cut the pasture grass and feed it to the hogs; when Pearl's maternal grandmother died, Lucille was eleven, so Addie raised her; recalls growing up alongside Lucille and cutting the weeds to feed the hogs; she and Lucille would let the hogs out and watch them; other childhood chores included shelling corn and retrieving eggs from the chickens; recalls a time when she walked home in water and her shoes were soaking wet; she attempted to dry the shoes in the wood stove, thinking they would dry faster than if they were by the fireplace, but she forgot to take them out before she went to sleep that night; the next morning, her shoes were burnt to a crisp and she had to no shoes to go to school; her father had to go to the store to buy her a new pair of shoes so she could attend school the next day; recalls people in the community making clothes for each other; many women in the community also quilted together; when the women got together to quilt, they would eat tea cakes; recalls the community always helping each other; people would help each other slaughter their livestock and wrap the meats; people would also share from their gardens;

recalls curing meats in a smokehouse, as well as drying and canning fruits and vegetables; her mother had a sausage grinder that she used to make fresh sausage from the meat of the hogs; her husband Payne was an agricultural teacher for the community; recalls many families having fruit trees and hogs, but they didn't know how to use what they had; recalls her mother preserving food in jars; recalls the milk trucks delivering milk every other day and people selling their leftover milk; her family bought items they couldn't grow, such as rice, meal, flour, rice, grits, sugar, and coffee; recalls never feeling deprived of food; recalls visiting her grandfather's house and her grandmother opening whatever food she had; recalls her grandmother killing turkeys and frying the meat in a skillet; recalls fishing with other children in the family; recalls accidentally catching snakes instead of fish one time; recalls catching crawfish and eating crawfish étouffée; her family's gardens included potatoes, okra, tomatoes, greens, cabbage, mustard, turnips, corn, watermelon, cantaloupe; recalls using and reusing jars to preserve food from the gardens; recalls helping in the gardens as a child; some people gardened by the moon, though her husband Payne taught people that they didn't have to; recalls games she would play as a child, such as "ring plays" and songs like "Skip to My Lou"; recalls playing with groups of children on Sunday evenings after church; recalls playing ball with makeshift balls made out of corn cobs and rags; recalls a baseball-inspired game her pastor played in which the children would have to describe Bible verses to advance to bases; recalls letting children play at her house when she was an adult with her own children; her husband Payne would bring horses from the farm for children to ride; she always cooked plenty of food and invited all the children to eat together; recalls different foods she, her mother, and her aunt would make, such as peach cobbler, cakes, and pies; her mother Addie especially loved making tea cakes, and enjoyed making them for various family members when they visited; her mother would always make a lot food and invited anyone in the community to eat; her mother lived to ninety-one; tape abruptly stops; end of Session I.

Session II

Tape 3499, Side A

Introduction; interview will start with discussion of Pearl's favorite childhood teachers, return to her husband Payne's desegregation case at LSU, as well as cover Pearl's own experience getting her master's degree in education at LSU; influential teachers in Powhatan and Natchitoches included Mrs. Elsie Perteet, Mrs. Earline Carey, and Mrs. Odile Cage Ward; discusses the educational center in Natchitoches where she received her college education based on the Grambling University curriculum; recalls encountering her first grade teacher, Ida B. Pugh, at the educational center; began teaching in the Natchitoches Parish School System, starting at Kelly Junior High School in 1936; discusses the year-round schooling for agribusiness, which her husband Payne taught; recalls always knowing that she wanted to teach; discusses the effects of the Depression on school children, who did not seem to notice it because they still had access to school supplies; schools remained segregated until about ten to twenty years after Pearl graduated high school; discusses the differences between Black schools and white schools; Black schools in Natchitoches initially were housed in unused houses on people's farms; the Rosenwald Fund helped people raise money and build schools for the Black community in Natchitoches; recalls moving from an old house to a new school building as a student and working there years later; discusses being aware of World War II before the United States of America was directly involved, as well as educating children about the war; recalls having to use points to purchase groceries, as opposed to normal currency; discusses how she and her husband Payne met working at the same school and married in Powhatan; Payne was from Lillie,

Louisiana, and was sent to Natchitoches as an agriculture teacher; Payne's parents were farmers that owned a four-hundred-acre farm in Union Parish, Louisiana; after Payne returned from serving in the Army during WWII, the superintendent of schools assigned both to work at the school in Powhatan; recalls the superintendent being a very considerate and supportive person that encouraged everyone to receive higher education; since Pearl was working throughout her college education, it took her twelve years to receive her degree in 1948; when she started teaching in 1936, her monthly income was \$40; recalls the year the state required that \$1.60 of teachers' checks contribute to a retirement fund; Pearl and other teachers did not want that money coming out of their checks, though in hindsight she acknowledges that it was beneficial; Pearl valued receiving further education and earning advanced degrees as a way to increase her salary; recalls people who had not pursued additional education receiving stipends of \$200; while Pearl was glad that other people were being helped, she also felt it was unfair to her and others that had sacrificed their own time and money to earn advanced degrees; discusses Payne's experience in the Army during WWII; he was initially stationed in Fort Gadsden in Alabama and shipped overseas to France; in the Army, Payne first worked as a secretary for his company, but then was trained to work as a meteorologist; Pearl visited him in Alabama during the summer when school wasn't in session; while Payne was overseas during the war, the superintendent assigned Pearl to be the principal at the school in Powhatan, since it was her home; recalls Payne's experience at LSU, saying that he was not harassed over his race, possibly due to being older at age thirty-two; although Payne did not experience harassment at LSU, Pearl recalls the way that A.P. Tureaud Junior (son of civil rights attorney A.P. Tureaud Senior) faced racial harassment at LSU; A.P. Tureaud Senior was also Payne's lawyer in the lawsuit against LSU regarding Payne's admission; recalls her own attendance at LSU, stating that she also did not face any harassment based on her race; before Payne was accepted at LSU, Louisiana had a program that sent Black students out of state to attend school; despite receiving a scholarship to Cornell University, Payne did not want to attend school out of state, as his agricultural work was specific to Louisiana; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) became involved in Payne's case against LSU; Payne helped teach agriculture at Northwestern University and Southern University, providing his own cattle as the schools did not have cattle; Payne was initially admitted to LSU, but when prompted to provide a photograph of himself, was denied because LSU was for whites only; in addition to A.P. Tureaud Senior, Thurgood Marshall represented Payne in his lawsuit against LSU; recalls Tureaud and Marshall visiting their home and discussing the case's progress; discusses the morning that Payne drove by himself to the trial; on the way to the trial, Payne encountered the president of Grambling, who was called as a character reference in the trial; LSU sent representatives to find out if Payne had ever been arrested or otherwise "had ever been in any kind of trouble"; the judge ultimately ordered that Payne be admitted to the LSU Graduate School; though Payne did not have roommates in his dorm at LSU, he was often visited by the son of a white doctor from Natchitoches; when Pearl was at LSU, she roomed with a good friend of hers, Elaine Peyton, who worked with her at the same school; discusses house rules for the dorm, such as having to sign in and out of the dorm; recalls other classmates, such as Vera Balthazar Johnson and Ruth Johnson; neither Pearl nor Payne received scholarships to attend LSU, so they paid for graduate school through saving their money; as an agricultural worker, Payne worked and was paid year-round; Payne also received financial assistance from the G.I. Bill; Pearl still taught in Natchitoches Parish while she attended graduate school; while in Baton Rouge for LSU, Pearl became friends with May Delpit, who ran the Chicken Shack and was also involved in the Baton

Rouge Bus Boycott (which occurred prior to Pearl's attendance at LSU); tape flips to Side B.

Tape 3499, Side B

Discusses some of her favorite professors at LSU, such as Doctor Deer, Doctor Black, and Doctor McCoy; recalls that Northwestern University was the last school in the area to integrate; her children graduated high school in the 1950s; her sons attended Southern University for undergraduate and earned their master's at Prairie View A&M University in Texas, while her daughter attended Fisk University in Tennessee for both undergraduate and her master's; her daughter worked at Southern University for two years through a program that partnered with Fisk University; recalls how her neighbors and the Natchitoches community overall responded to Payne's lawsuit to attend LSU; neither Pearl nor Payne felt any fear over the lawsuit, though they did increase the insurance on their house; overall, they received positive support from the community; Payne was initially unsure if he would lose his teaching job, but when he returned to work, the superintendent supported him; Payne also worked with the agriculture department at Southern University and visited various high schools in Louisiana to teach students; Payne bought a four-hundred-acre farm and put his cattle on it; they never lived on the farm because it would occasionally flood; when the farm flooded, Payne would move the cattle to higher ground; Payne would bring high school students to the farm to show them the cattle and how to judge them; Pearl started at LSU in 1953 and graduated with her master's in education in 1956; recalls having extension in Winnfield, Louisiana, where she would go on Tuesday nights; she and five of her classmates would carpool together from Natchitoches to LSU every Saturday; her mother watched the children on days when she went to LSU; recalls meeting many people with various experiences at LSU and learning from them; she was excited to implement what she learned from others with her own students; during the summer, Pearl worked with a program that trained veterans to farm; recalls former students in the veteran farm training program that she was particularly proud of; discusses being asked to teach algebra and science at Northwestern Junior High School the first year that the school integrated; at Northwestern Junior High School, Pearl taught students that had the highest test scores; she was transferred to the lab school on the Northwestern University campus; reminisces about starting her life beginning in a small rural school and progressing to teach at a highly rated lab school; retired from teaching at fifty-four years old; her husband Payne retired around the same time as she did, though he was asked to help build and run Natchitoches Thomas Apartments; Pearl also helped Payne with residential management at the apartments; recalls traveling on different family vacations with their children to different states around the United States; also traveled for housing related conferences with Payne; recalls completing residential management training in Washington, D.C. for elderly and for multi-family housing; recalls making friends through her housing work with whom she remained close; describes helping residents complete paperwork, recounting an example of a woman asking for help with her grandfather's veteran benefits; discusses her experience volunteering in voter registration drives in the late 1940s; she was assigned to the Pan-Am district of Natchitoches; her voter registration work involved helping and teaching people how to complete their voter registration forms; claims that they never encountered any trouble getting people registered to vote, though Payne had run into problems years prior when he registered to vote; Payne and two other people attempted to register to vote, but they were given multiple excuses regarding why they could not register; Payne contacted lawyers regarding not being able to register to vote; Pearl did not encounter any problems when she registered to vote later; after Payne and the other two were not initially allowed to vote, state representatives from the

Registrar of Voters visited their homes to gather information and help them register to vote; there was not any violence or retaliation associated with Payne's effort to register to vote; recalls some leaders in the community, such as Doctor E.A. Johnson, who was also from Powhatan; other influential figures in the community included brother John J. Lewis and Scotty Lewis, who were connected with the Masonic lodge; discusses never learning about African American history until college; tape ends.

Tape 3500, Side A

Resumes discussion about learning African American history at Grambling University; recalls that schools were focused on teaching students basic skills, as some students were not even able to hold a pencil; schools were only in session for seven months (as opposed to nine), because children were expected to work in the fields; discusses Payne teaching agribusiness and bringing students to Southern University to learn; Payne and other agriculture teachers attended a trade school in Shreveport on Tuesday nights to keep abreast of developments in agriculture and agribusiness; recalls always working at the same schools with Payne, except for her last two schools; when she and Payne worked in housing together, they traveled around the state of Louisiana, attending Mardi Gras for the first time, as well as the World's Fair in New Orleans in 1984; recalls the Natchitoches Christmas Festival that she attended as a child, as well as how her family celebrated Christmas and Easter during her childhood; discusses learning to read at a young age; one of her childhood neighbors saved their newspapers for her to read, which she enjoyed, especially reading about movie stars like Bob Hope and Claudette Colbert; recalls influential Black figures in Natchitoches during her childhood, such as her great-uncle, who was the first Black superintendent in the parish; recalls hearing older men discuss attending Coleman College in Gibson, Louisiana; she was encouraged by members of her community to attend Grambling University, especially Superintendent Lee; recalls Superintendent Lee offering a Payne a job teaching at Pearl's school after he returned from his service in WWII; recalls other important adults who were influential during her childhood, such as close family friends Jesse Turner and Alma Johnson; discusses her church creating the Pearl Payne Scholarship Fund to help students attend college; describes her church before and after it was renovated in 1921; reflects on the values that her mother instilled in her as a child; describes her mother as encouraging and supportive; recalls a woman that owned and ran a store in Powhatan that sold her soap before she moved to Alexandria to attend Peabody High School; discusses people making their own soap and home remedies when she was a child; recalls the midwife that helped her mother give birth to her at home, "Cousin" Glycie; recalls another midwife that birthed her cousins and others in the community, who was known as "Aunt Sis"; describes knowing where babies came from by listening to the adults in her family when she was child; inquires if LSU has a class reunion for people that earned their master's; discusses upcoming family reunion; interview concludes; end of Session II.

TAPES: 3 (T3498, T3499, T3500)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 3 hours, 15 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 154 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Digital photograph of Pearl Payne; North Star Baptist Church program for Pearl's 85th birthday celebration; dedication to Pearl's 85th birthday in Natchitoches newspaper *The Real Views*; photocopies of correspondence to Lutrill Payne from Southern University, Natchitoches Parish School Board, and the State of Louisiana Department of Education; photocopies of scrapbook related to Lutrill Payne's lawsuit against LSU; photocopies of legal documents regarding Lutrill Payne's lawsuit against LSU.

RESTRICTIONS: None