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Session I
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[Begin Tape 4407. Begin Session I.]

ELIZABETH GELVIN: Alright, today is January 24, 2015. I am Elizabeth Gelvin, representing the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History with LSU [Louisiana State University] Libraries. We're working in conjunction with the Imperial Calcasieu Museum and Bill Shearman to document the history of Mossville, Louisiana. To kick that off, we are holding Mossville Oral History Day, here at the Rigmaiden Recreational Center on Old Spanish Trail. So, I'm here today with Mrs. Janie Gardner.

JANIE GARDNER: Yes.

GELVIN: [00:26] Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This is going to be short . . . Maybe ten, fifteen minutes. But we'll be in touch with you later if you're interested in setting up a longer, more extended interview.

GARDNER: Okay.

GELVIN: Okay? Alright. So, to start off, could you please state your full name for me?

GARDNER: [00:44] My name is Janie Lyons Dotson Gardner.

GELVIN: Lyons Dotson Gardner? Wow. Awesome. What is your . . . What is your birthday? When were you born?

GARDNER: August 14, 1946.

GELVIN: Nineteen forty-six. Okay, great. And you were born here in Mossville?

GARDNER: Lake Charles.

GELVIN: In Lake Charles? When did you move to Mossville?

GARDNER: My parents adopted me.

GELVIN: Okay.

GARDNER: So I moved probably shortly after birth.

GELVIN: Shortly after birth. And your parents were from Mossville?

GARDNER: [01:14] They were . . . My father was originally from Westlake [Louisiana], my mother was originally from Okmulgee, Oklahoma. They moved to Mossville, I'd say, in 1945.

GELVIN: Nineteen forty-five. What are your parents' names?

GARDNER: Dave Lyons and Lula Lyons.

GELVIN: Awesome. What were your grandparents' names?

GARDNER: My father's father was named Simon or Simeon Lyons, and my grandmother was Mary Lyons. I don't know my mom's.

GELVIN: You don't know your mom's side.

GARDNER: No. I don't know everything about her. I know she had three sisters and three brothers, and my father had two brothers and one sister.

GELVIN: Two brothers and one sister. What did your parents do for a living?

GARDNER: [01:57] My father worked on refrigeration. And he . . . And my mother, she was a day worker for a part-time, for a while. And then from there, she worked what, five

days a week for five dollars a day. And from there she went to Chateau Charles as a . . . Working as a salad girl. Then she did daycare, well, she did nursery, she was a nanny.

GELVIN: Could you explain a salad girl to me?

GARDNER: She just made the salads at the restaurant--

GELVIN: Just made the salads! Okay. Gotcha. [Gardner laughs] I thought so! But I was just like, I don't know, maybe she's doing something crazy involving salads.

GARDNER: [02:34] And then she worked at, I think it was First Baptist Church of Westlake, and she took care of the nursery.

GELVIN: Okay, awesome. How many siblings do you have?

GARDNER: One.

GELVIN: One? Awesome.

GARDNER: One . . . Well, I have a total of two sisters and a brother, but with my mom and dad, I had a brother and myself.

GELVIN: Awesome. So, could you maybe share some memories of growing up with your siblings in Mossville? Like what y'all would do for fun?

GARDNER: [3:05] Crawfish.

GELVIN: Crawfish?

GARDNER: Right across the street. I lived across the street--

GELVIN: Oh, wow.

GARDNER: [03:09] Directly across the street. We would go in the little ditch, and we would crawfish. We would climb trees. I was a tomboy. I shot marbles. For my twelfth birthday, I got a BB gun.

GELVIN: Aw, yeah. [Gardner and Gelvin laughing] That's what I'm talking about.

GARDNER: We . . . I had a good life here. The recreation center was here. The pool was there, so I went swimming practically every day . . . Never learned to swim, but I went to the pool. We came across here. [cell phone rings] This was before this time, before this facility. It was where the school was. The school was a two-room school, and there was a partition in the middle, so we played there. And you walked back and forth, down the street with your friends. So, it was a good place to grow up.

GELVIN: Yes, it sounds good.

GARDNER: It was a great place to grow up. You know, it was a place where you didn't realize that you were poor. [Gardner laughs]

DONALD DOTSON, JR.: I didn't realize the recreation center was here, and the pool was still here.

GARDNER: Yes.

GELVIN: [04:08] Would you mind stating your full name for me as well? Now that I have you on the audio--

DOTSON, JR.: I am Donald Dotson, Jr. I am her son, her oldest.

GELVIN: Awesome.

DONALD DOTSON, JR.: Yes.

GELVIN: Do you have, maybe, some similar memories from childhood?

DONALD DOTSON, JR.: The same things that she's saying! [You can't believe it?]
[all laugh]

DAREN DOTSON, SR.: [Daren is Gardner's youngest son] Exact same!

DONALD DOTSON, JR: I didn't realize that they had this facility--

GARDNER: When I was growing up--

DONALD DOTSON, JR: I didn't realize the history of that.

GELVIN: That's awesome.

GARDNER: [04:33] Look my mom spoiled my sons. To the point that, one summer they said they wanted a horse and a dog. So, when they came home for the summer, there was a horse in the backyard and a dog in the backyard.

GELVIN: I heard-- [All laugh] I heard that apocryphal story!

GARDNER: Before they left, because we lived in Maryland . . . Before they left, my children were running behind some kids with a bike. My mom went out and bought the bike the same day! They left two days later, but they had a bike.

GELVIN: Aw, man.

GARDNER: They were her hearts.

GELVIN: Classic grandma move.

GARDNER: [05:05] Yes! I don't move quite like that. [laughs]

NICHELLE LOWE-DOTSON: [Daren Dotson Sr.'s wife] Close.

GELVIN: Did you go to school here?

GARDNER: Yes. I graduated . . . I went to school here, in this little area right here. There was a building . . . Now they call them sharpshooters. There was a . . . That's where the seventh and eighth graders, six seven and eight, went to school. And then the room . . . The building that I went had first second and third in one section. Then there was a partition, and there was fourth and fifth and sixth. Then there was another sharpshooter where you had lunch.

GELVIN: Awesome. That was right here? Where the recreational center is?

GARDNER: Yes. Right in this location. They had an outdoor bathroom, I remember that. [all laugh] Because I used to want to go to the bathroom, and the kids treated me mean! They wouldn't let me! Then there was this water trough where you got water outside. It was this big trough, and they had all these little water spigots. I went there until I was in the fourth grade, and in the fifth grade they built a new school. I went to school there. Now, I only went there until I was in the sixth grade, and my parents moved me . . . Sent me to boarding school. So, I went to boarding school for four years.

GELVIN: Where'd you go to boarding school?

GARDNER: [06:24] In Lafayette [Louisiana]. It was called Holy Rosary Institute. I went to school there for four years, and my dad lost his leg . . . He was unable to work. So, I came home, and I went my last two years at Mossville.

GELVIN: At Mossville.

GARDNER: [06:40] And it was good, because it was a totally different environment, you know? You had football games, you had all of this freedom that you didn't have in a Catholic school. [Gardner and Gelvin laugh]

GELVIN: No nuns, anyway.

GARDNER: And it was great.

GELVIN: Awesome, that's great. Do you have any . . .

GARDNER: They used to give you . . . They used to have movies, down at this school during the summer, for the kids. You'd go to movies, I think it was every Tuesday night. So you could go down to the movie, because there wasn't a whole lot of things going on around here. But the one thing that my mom taught me . . . You know, she exposed me to . . . I took ballet, I took tap. She exposed me to the arts. Even though she only made twenty five dollars a week, but

she still exposed me to all of those. She brought me up to be a strong woman. She told me that I was as good as everybody else, no matter who they were. She taught me not to say yes ma'am and no ma'am, just to say yes and no. It helped me to become a strong individual.

[07:41] I moved to Maryland . . . Well, I got divorced, got married, moved to Maryland. But, with only a high school education I was able to still do what I needed to do. I worked hard, I got . . . I bought my own home. I took care of my children. Maybe I never made fifty thousand a year, but I made forty eight! [laughs] But that's with just a high school education. That didn't give you accounting, that didn't teach you foreign languages. But she taught me to be a strong individual, to work hard for whatever I wanted. I was able to do it.

Now I have a son with a master . . . He's a master plumber. He's getting a journeyman's plumber. I have a grandson who graduated from Louisiana Tech, and has a bachelor of science and majored in physics. I have a granddaughter who is currently at McNeese taking nursing. My daughter-in-law here is in school. My other daughter-in-law is an RN. You know, God just blessed. So from that humble beginning, God just manifested . . . And if I hadn't been here, hadn't learned the things that I learned here, I wouldn't be the person I am today.

GELVIN: Definitely.

BILL SHEARMAN: What happened to the property?

GARDNER: [09:00] We sold it to Sasol just recently.

SHEARMAN: Just recently?

GARDNER: Yes.

UNNAMED: It hasn't been a year. March . . . March will be a year.

GARDNER: Yes.

SHEARMAN: Okay.

GARDNER: So, it was directly across the street. I grew up across the street from here. [door opens] The house that I originally moved to is still standing. We lived . . . My father bought the house that is behind there. Then, eventually, he bought more property. He had what was called the Lyon's subdivision for a while. Then he sold the land off.

SHEARMAN: How long have you been back in Mossville?

GARDNER: [09:29] I've been here . . . I moved back from Maryland about two and a half years ago.

SHEARMAN: Okay.

GARDNER: You know, I never thought I'd come back to Louisiana. But I'm happy here. I like it here.

DONALD DOTSON, JR: I brought you here.

GARDNER: Yes, he brought me here! [all laugh] And I'm happy here. Now that it's all gone, you can look back and see how great it was, being here.

SHEARMAN: Your family retained property for all these years?

GARDNER: Yes.

SHEARMAN: Good. [phone rings]

GARDNER: Yes. It wasn't until they bought it. Because he [gesturing to son] lived in my house here until . . . until March. We were here. We weren't going anywhere. But, you know, if the plant's going to take over everything . . . Yeah, I don't care to be . . .

NICHELLE LOWE-DOTSON: [Dotson Sr.'s wife speaks] [. . . ?] exposed to all those chemicals.

GARDNER: [10:14] Believe it or not, my mom lived to be ninety two.

SHEARMAN: Good.

GARDNER: My dad lived to be seventy nine. But my dad had diabetes.

SHEARMAN: Yes ma'am.

GARDNER: [10:25] He had lost both of his legs. But he was the type of person who never stopped. He was never handicapped. My daddy built a boat from his wheelchair. I mean, a boat that you could put out in the water! The day he died, he was building a rack to put his motor on. I mean, that man, he would get in there, wash clothes, mop the floors, wash the cars. Daddy would do anything he wanted to do.

DAREN DOTSON SR.: [10:50] He didn't let that wheelchair slow him down.

GARDNER: No. So, that gave you the inspiration to just keep going because, hey if they could do this, we could do it. She had her ninetieth birthday party right here.

GELVIN: Here at the rec center?

DAREN DOTSON SR.: Yes. Oh and could dance! At ninety years old, could two-step.
[Gelvin laughs]

GARDNER: Oh, I was laughing, I made people laugh. This is a joke about Mom, but it's true. My mom told me when she was seventy six, she said, "I don't understand you young people. You're always saying you can't find a man." She said, "Here I am, cancer, with a pacemaker, and I just found me one a year younger than me!" She married him . . . She divorced him two years later because she said because she didn't need that hassle! [all laugh] You never

saw her without her makeup on. They came to visit her one day, and she didn't have her makeup on. She shut the door in their face. Then she went in, put her makeup on, put her stockings on, got dressed, and then invited them all in. [all laugh]

GELVIN: A true lady.

SHEARMAN: First things first.

GARDNER: [11:50] She was an awesome woman.

DOTSON: [. . .?] a lady.

GARDNER: I didn't take after her. [laughs] I had a good life. I really did. To say that I was able to have that life, that meant that they struggled to send me to school so that I'd have a better life.

DAREN DOTSON SR: You know, I would have never thought what you told me . . . Five dollars a day? The way they lived, I would have never thought they was like that. [computer noise goes off several times in the background] Because, to me, they always had money. I would have never know. That just goes to show . . .

GARDNER: The freezer was always full. There was always a side of beef in the freezer, there was always a half a pig in the freezer. There was always food. No, I didn't live in

the fancy house like, maybe a couple people did. But my house was a house where everybody was welcome. So people came, and we enjoyed. As a kid, I didn't realize we used to go take the steaks out of the freezer and cook them. Now, shoot, if someone look like that wanted to take my steak, I'd hurt them! [all laugh] But, you know, they didn't care.

When they got me, they were already in their forties. My mom must have been forty, my dad must have been forty eight. The one thing she didn't do . . . She didn't teach me to cook. She didn't teach me to clean. She didn't teach me all the things I was going to need to know as I grew up, because they just spoiled us. They spoiled me rotten, they spoiled them rotten. They were good people. And this was a good community. You could walk down the street at night. I'd have to walk my friend to her house, and then she'd walk me to my house, and then I'd walk her back to her house.

[13:33] One funny episode, we ran into a German shepherd. I'd never seen a German shepherd before. So, I'm telling my girlfriend . . . Her name is Frank . . . I said, "Don't run because it will chase you." By the time I said, "Don't run," I looked up, she was already home! [all laugh] I'm standing there. So I took off running, too! It was a good place to grow up. The kids are good people. You didn't hear about all of this killing, drugs . . . You know, none of that stuff when I was growing up. I don't know what goes on now, but you didn't have that when I was growing up. It was a good place to grow up. The teachers were good. They cared about you. They encouraged you.

I did, I went to work. Like I said, my mom worked in day . . . Did day labor. See, I went to work once. I did, no, two days. I said, "This is not for me." I can't be cleaning nobody's house for five dollars. That was not for me. But, had I not gone out . . . Found out. Then I realized I wanted more. So, I went to school. I went to [?], but then I moved to Maryland, so I didn't. I did

take courses at [PG?]. But if you study hard, and you put your best foot forward, you can be anything you want to be . . .

SHEARMAN: Ma'am, does your . . . Do your memories of Mossville go back to when there was no electricity?

GARDNER: No! Look . . . When I came up, I had . . . I just assumed there was lights, there was telephone. We didn't have a party line . . . Some people had a party line. I also had a TV.

SHEARMAN: Okay.

GARDNER: So, I always had everything that everybody . . . That I thought everybody else had. So, no. I didn't even go out . . . My house didn't even have an outside bathroom as far as I know.

SHEARMAN: [15:25] Was Old Spanish Trail gravel when you were a child?

GARDNER: No, it was paved! It would get really hot. If you were wearing flip-flops, your shoes would stay . . . You could be running across and your shoes would stay on the street. [laughs] But they may have just paved it, you know, around the time. The road in front of my house is still gravel. So all of that was still gravel then.

SHEARMAN: Okay.

GARDNER: [15:51] I am old, but I ain't that old! [all laugh] No, I don't remember it ever being gravel.

SHEARMAN: Okay. Thank you.

GELVIN: Well, I have a few more questions for you.

GARDNER: Okay.

GELVIN: Before we wrap things up, if that's okay.

GARDNER: Yes.

GELVIN: I wanted to ask you . . . After sharing all these great stories with me about Mossville . . . And just all these stories about Mossville growing up . . . What does the word 'home' mean to you? What does home mean to you?

GARDNER: [16:19] Here.

GELVIN: Could you tell me a little bit about why?

GARDNER: This was all I knew. Even though I spent most of my life . . . I spent more of my life in Maryland. I thought, when I was in Maryland that was home. But coming back . . . You realize this is home. [voice cracking with emotion] You know? Everything about this is home, because this is what I grew up with. This has helped to mold me to be who I am. This is where my friends are. I don't see a lot of them now, because I was gone so long, but this is . . .

When you think back, this is what you remember. You remember shooting marbles. You remember climbing the trees. You remember riding the bikes. You remember walking to the store. We had a little community store called Rougeau's. Mr. Rougeau would come and get my dad . . . Every weekend, they went fishing. So you always had fresh fish . . . Had crabs . . . And all the things, that means a lot. This was home, because this was where my mom and dad was.

GELVIN: And . . . On that note, what does community mean to you?

GARDNER: [17:40] Family. They say it takes a village to raise a child. Here, when I was growing up . . . You did wrong in school, you got in trouble all the way to the house. [Gardner and Gelvin laugh] The person over here heard you got in trouble, so you might've got a pop there . . . And you might have got here, and you know you were going to get popped when you got home. Everybody looked out for everybody. If you had something, then nobody was hungry. That's how I see community now. I see it where I live. I want to know my people around me. In Maryland, you had . . . You never knew who lived next door to you.

DAREN DOTSON SR: Didn't know your neighbors.

GARDNER: You know, you see them, you holler at them, and that was it. But you knew those people. You knew the people. That's what I think community is . . . family.

GELVIN: What to you is the most important thing about Mossville that you want people to remember? That they might not find in history books or news articles? Like, what's sort of the most important thing about Mossville that you'd like people to know?

GARDNER: [18:50] That it was a great place to grow up in . . . That you did have that love here. You had that family. We all loved each other. Everybody . . . There was nobody, no matter how high you thought you were or how low you thought you were. Everybody was an individual. You just . . . [sniffs] You know, the people next door . . . They didn't have a whole lot. They had a bunch of kids. They were Braxtons, I think . . . They used the bathroom in the little building . . . But, you know, it didn't matter! You all played together. Everybody saw each other as just individuals. That's what people need to know. That this was a good community. The fact that it's not going to be here any longer doesn't mean that it didn't exist. It existed, and it will still exist . . . And that it was their loss that it's not here anymore.

GELVIN: Well, before we wrap up, is there anything you or anyone else would like to add onto this interview? Anything else y'all would like to say about Mossville? You'll definitely have another opportunity in the future to . . . If you . . .

DONALD DOTSON, JR: Not right now.

GARDNER: No.

LOWE-DOTSON: [20:14] The only memory I have here . . . I've only been here three years, in the house that was sold.

GELVIN: Would you mind actually saying your full name for me?

LOWE-DOTSON: I'm sorry. Nichelle Lowe-Dotson. I had my daughter here in Louisiana, Lake Charles . . . At forty six. She had her first birthday party right across the way here in the little playground area. You know, it was nice. First birthday is a big deal, so that's one of the things I'm definitely going to remember about being here. I met a lot of good people here that his mom introduced me to . . . Or grew up with his mom, and had stories to tell me about his mom. [laughs] Stuff like that. So, I've met a lot of good people here, in this area, since I've been here. I came here from Maryland myself, and I didn't know anyone . . . Was my husband's people.

GELVIN: Gotcha.

LOWE-DOTSON: So they welcomed me in and made me feel at home. That's one thing I am definitely going to remember about Mossville. I hate to see that it's gone.

GARDNER: You never meet a stranger. That's the thing, you don't meet a stranger. You know, if you don't know them, you can still have a conversation . . . They'll still treat you . . . They'll give you a hug.

DOTSON JR: Everybody waves.

GARDNER: [21:23] Everybody says hello and waves when they see you. So, that's what I think the difference in Mossville and living in the city. I mean, even if it's Louisiana city. . . It's still the city, and it's a difference.

GELVIN: Gotcha. Yes, well, I want to thank you on behalf of the project, but also just personally. Thank you for sharing your story with us today.

GARDNER: Thank you.

GELVIN: Thank you.

DAREN DOTSON SR: It was awesome.

GELVIN: Thanks, you guys.

[21:54]

[End Tape 4407. End Session I.]