

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Laura Mae Romero

COLLECTION: 4700.0517

IDENTIFICATION: Woman who sewed baby clothes for Acadian Handicraft Project.

INTERVIEWER: Pamela Rabalais and Yvonne Olivier

SERIES: Acadian Handicraft Project

INTERVIEW DATES: Session I: August 8, 1995; Session II: April 19, 1996

FOCUS DATES: 1950s – 1960s

ABSTRACT:

Session I

Tape 739, Side A

Romero's grandfather was from France; Mother named Lucy Berger Leblanc; Her mother and aunts all sewed for businesses in New Orleans [Louisiana]; They sewed for two companies, Maison Roff and Isabelle; Miss [Louise V.] Olivier [field representative for Acadian Handicraft Project] came to Romero's house in 1946 and asked her to sew for the AHP; Romero doesn't know how Olivier heard of her; A woman from Nashville [Tennessee] ordered a child's dress from Romero and it was in Sew Beautiful magazine; Romero and her husband were married for fifty-three years; She sewed before she married in 1940; When Romero's husband, Frank, got out of the Service at the end of World War Two, he wanted to go back to farming; The money Romero made with the AHP went to her daughters, Diane and Peggy, were born two years and twenty-one days apart; Neither of Romero's children sew; Romero wants them to need her to sew for them; Romero was married at the age of nineteen; Romero was better at putting insertions into clothes than her mother was; Romero used silk thread to embroider when she worked for the AHP; Romero makes christening dresses and handkerchiefs for special occasions; Romero embroiders the dates on them to commemorate the special occasion; Romero used [cotton] batiste to make the items she sewed for the AHP; Romero discusses where she bought material and notions for her christening gowns and baby clothes; Romero made red flannel boy gowns during the winter for AHP; Miss Olivier came and visited Romero often; The Romero's would often give gifts to Olivier; Romero talks about unskilled people who tried to participate in sewing for the AHP; Romero worked/sewed at her house; Romero puts blue tissue paper inside the gowns which makes the handwork show easier; Romero drew patterns of her work and gave one to Oliver, Olivier numbered the patterns and would use the numbers to tell Romero how many of what kind of gown to make; Olivier would bring ideas from either the paper or advertisements to Romero and have her recreate the clothes; Romero's mother and aunt made baby clothes for their family and then used this skill to earn extra money; Romero's husband, Frank, grew sugarcane,

cotton, corn, and soy beans; Romero uses a thimble while sewing; Romero discusses tiny needles that are manufactured in England that she likes to use; Romero tells a story of being stuck with a tiny needle; Romero buys her fabric at Wal-Mart; Romero tells a story of making her granddaughter a dress out of Neola, a type of fabric similar to batiste; The fabric cost twenty-five dollars a yard; Olivier insisted that Romero use Swiss batiste fabric for the christening dresses she made; It took Romero one day to make one sleeve of her granddaughter's dress; Romero paid the postage for shipping the items she made for the AHP; Romero did not sew for anyone else or any other shops while working for the AHP; When Olivier died in 1962 the AHP stopped; After the AHP stopped Romero sewed for others including Mrs. Melbeck in Abbeville [Louisiana]; Romero also sells her clothing to directly to individuals; Romero tells a story about some women who stopped to look at her clothes while she was gone and stole a gown; Mary Alice Fontenot took one of Romero's dresses to France; Romero enjoys reading her Sew Beautiful magazine; Romero says that the dress she made for her granddaughter could be in Sew Beautiful

Tape 739, Side B

Interviewers and Romero discuss baby bonnets and how you adjust the size; Romero talks about the cost of nice lace; Olivier always used pretty lace, gooseneck and lily of the valley lace for example; Romero uses wider lace for the bottom of a christening dress and narrower lace at the top and on the sleeves; Romero describes gooseneck lace; Interviewers and Romero look through a magazine and discuss what they see; Interviewers and Romero look at a dress made by Romero; The dress has silk thread in it as well as lace, and embroidery; Romero embroiders the dates and initials of special occasions in her christening dresses for no extra charge; Romero charges between one hundred twenty-five to one hundred fifty dollars for a christening dress; Romero does all the work herself; Romero gives her clients a little clipping of the dress she makes for their baby book; Interviewers look in Romero's room with all her materials and finished items and comment on them; Romero gives Interviewers some items for the museum at Louisiana State University [Textile and Costume Museum in the LSU School of Human Ecology]; Interviewer brought christening dress that belonged to her son and she and Romero discussed it; Romero makes her tucks with one piece of thread; Romero mended a dress that was seventy-five years old; Romero talks about a dress for her grandchildren; Romero is making many different dresses in different sizes and colors for her future grandchildren; discussion of how to preserve christening dresses; Interviewers look at photograph of Romero's daughter in the heirloom dress made by Romero

Session II

Tape 970 Side, A

Pam Rabalais introduces herself and Laura Mae Romero; They are in Erath, Louisiana; Interview topic is infant wear sewing in the Abbeville and Erath area of Louisiana; Romero's mother and sisters were the first to sew in the area which used to be called Charon [?]; It is now called the LeBlanc community; Romero's grandfather was a school teacher. He wrote to shops in New Orleans for sewing orders and would address packages to companies for other area sewers because he could write. Lillian's shop was Louise's shop, and there was Isabelle and Maison Roff; people in the area learned to sew from one another; the sisters learned to sew when they were young. Sewing was something that they could do at home for a little income, both before and after they were married; Romero's husband never told her how to spend her earnings; she

liked to have her own money. When she wanted something she just bought it; Romero doesn't know if the sisters knew how to sew before their father sent for the first sewing order from shops in New Orleans. Romero says that old people knew how to do everything; Romero thinks they first sewed for Isabelle; After Isabelle there was Maison Blanche; which was called Maison Roff; Romero doesn't know if the sisters did any designing; she thinks they probably were sent a picture with design on it to follow in embroidery. Romero was sewing for Isabelle who paid a dollar per dozen for slips. Romero doesn't remember anyone coming from Isabelle, or any of the New Orleans companies, out to the Leblanc community. Miss Louise [Olivier, field representative Acadian Handicraft Project] would come and visit them. Orders were sent through the mail; Romero thinks Isabelle was on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans, Louisiana; Romero cannot remember where Maison Roff was located; Miss [Louise] Olivier sold to baby shops all over Louisiana, but could not sell out of state. Orders for the AHP were sent to sewers, the shop for which they were being made would be written on order; Sewers had to send it in box, pressed, with tissue paper to Olivier; Every year, sewers had to make new samples and new designs; Olivier would check them out and show them to the shops who would order in different sizes and colors; Sewing was a little income everyone liked; some had never sewed and Miss Olivier could not get rid of some of the pieces that were sewn poorly; Seamstresses in the AHP were told to put tissue paper in bottom of box and between the items. Romero started putting blue paper in christening dresses, to bring out the work. The items had to be ironed; Olivier was concerned with quality and wanted certain laces; pretty laces were available and reasonably priced; there were particular thread combinations for garments: light pink and white; light blue and white; all white; light yellow and white; use green only when requested. Green thread was used for leaves. They used all cotton thread when they first started sewing. Romero started using silk thread for her christening thread; now, she cannot find it. The little she has, she keeps for her christening dresses. Some sewers didn't like working with silk thread. Olivier would tell them what colors they had to use for embroidering; Olivier gave suggestions for where the workers should purchase materials; Romero never did sew for children as old as 4 years; Olivier had some people who wove baskets, some would make handkerchiefs, and some made cornhusk dolls; Romero sewed a lot of different items for the AHP, christening dresses and gowns. Every year Olivier sent her a bolt of red flannel for a little boy's gown with frogs; Diaper shirts were worn in those days as they were; Snuggers were the infant gowns with a drawstring at the bottom; Romero's patterns all have names; Romero calls the snuggers long string gowns; Olivier would bring pictures she had cut from the paper, asking them to use the ideas to design new items; Olivier coming to Romero's house the first time she came, on later trips meeting with them as a group; She never sewed for a company after the AHP; Baltazor's [Fabric Boutique] was a New Orleans store and Romero did sew a little for her. Tradition of embroidering dates and names on the front of christening dresses was Romero's idea. Rabalais reads from letters that Romero wrote to Olivier as well as some newspaper articles about the AHP; Romero's mother preferred gowns and diaper shirts. Romero would have small gifts for Olivier most of the times she visited, such as candy; Part of the worker's job was to make samples of something different items to entice new orders; Romero's first sewing machine was a Necchi [brand of sewing machine] and then she got a Singer [brand of sewing machine]

Tape 970, Side B

Romero preferred to sew by hand for the Project, her daughters made her nervous around the

sewing machine. Romero's daughters learned to sew with the machine; Letter from Romero to Olivier about a particular color yellow, number fifty-three; Olivier didn't like dark colors. Romero discusses the standard hem she used along with the type of stitch she used; At first, Olivier let everyone machine sew, but some had oily machines, causing problems. Olivier continued to let some people sew with machines, she made others sew by hand; Romero discusses seam allowances; Sometimes, Romero pulled a thread in the lace to gather it; other times she gathered it by hand; Romero used size one hundred sewing thread; Romero can not find that size thread now; she uses lingerie thread, which is similar; The eyes of the needles were so small; they had to use size one hundred size thread. Needles were made in England, can't be found today; Romero discusses the types of embroidery stitches she used; Romero discusses the types of thread she prefers; Romero makes her tucks the same, all the tucks are small, the small needles enabling her to make small tucks; Rabalais thanks Romero for her time.

TAPES: 2 (T739, T970)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 2 hours, 15 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: **Session I:** 51 page transcript

PAGES INDEX: **Session II:** 7 page index

OTHER MATERIALS: None

RESTRICTIONS: None