

## T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

### ABSTRACT

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Herman Cooper

**COLLECTION:** 4700.0699

**IDENTIFICATION:** Longtime employee of Deselle Funeral Home in South Baton Rouge

**INTERVIEWERS:** Rudolph Henry and Michael Goods

**SERIES:** McKinley High School Oral History Project - African American Businesses

**INTERVIEW DATE:** July 1, 1996

**FOCUS DATES:** 1940s-1950s

### ABSTRACT:

#### Tape 1026, Side A

Introduction; Cooper born in Baton Rouge; parents [Frank?] and Cora Cooper (née Johnson); brothers James and Leander live in Baton Rouge also; started working with Adam D. Desselle at Capital Funeral Home in 1945; he has lived all over South Baton Rouge; People's Funeral Home, Marcel's Service Station, other buildings and business in that vicinity like Beulah Baptist Church, Neely Methodist Church, Trahan's mechanic shop; Butler Building on Washington Street is now being torn down, once held Dr. Butler's office, a barbershop and cafeteria; Old McKinley was the only high school, any African American child "from far or near" went there; local cafes like Hours, Mama's, Jolly Inn, Tumbler's Inn; former location of People's Funeral Home on East Blvd; churches in the area of Terrace Ave and Thirteenth Street including [McEwen?] Baptist Church, New Ark Baptist Church, New Prospect Baptist Church; he used to buy groceries at National on Texas and Polk Streets; other grocery stores were [Greenhams's?], [Picarro's?] and Streamline; the National store burnt down and they built a McDonalds there; H.G. Hill grocery store on Florida Street; Baton Rouge General Hospital only served black patients in the basement, there was no air down there; he has worked at Desselle Funeral Home since 1948; explanation of where the old funeral home was and surrounding buildings; building remodeled in the 1960s and again in 1988; WJBO was once located near McKinley High; he and Desselle left Capital Funeral Home in 1946; Desselle started building his funeral home in 1948; Baton Rouge city limits at that time, street boundaries; many roads were gravel, most houses had no indoor plumbing; McKinley had no athletic fields so they played football on the City Park grounds on East Blvd; discusses old and new names of local streets, north and south street names with dividing line of North Blvd; he doesn't know why they use three or four names for the same street; one street is named after Eddie Robinson but "nobody knew him", they just knew he was a coach at Grambling; Purple Circle Social Club on South Blvd, with a bakery and Blundon Orphanage nearby; was sixteen when he started working for funeral homes; street fairs on Terrace Street, it was mostly vacant land; area of Terrace and Highland Road; old location of Fairview Baptist Church near where McKinley is now; Louise Street was gravel, made funerals there difficult; Jerusalem Baptist Church on East Blvd; First Emmanuel Baptist Church faced Education Street; Chicken Shack on East Blvd was open every day; Harding Field was an army base; soldiers stationed there frequented the Chicken Shack; soldiers at Harding Field were all from out-of-state; MPs coming to Chicken Shack and soldiers hiding from them under a booth; Southern Funeral Home went out of business, was operated by

John and Edward Daigre; there were only four funeral homes for blacks - Gilbert's, Daigre's, People's and Capital; old location of Welsh Funeral Home; Adam's Funeral Home; Harvest Moon saloon; Harlem Club was near Trahan's Meat Market and a car wash; [Mack?] Anderson had the Boulevard Motel right by Neely Church; businesses near the Butler Building included Levy Barber Shop and X-Ray Cleaners; Reverend E. J. Ford had a barbershop on Louise Street;

**Tape 1026, Side B**

Two-story building that used to be Black's Grocery; Cooper asked why black-owned businesses failed; he was discussing with someone how Vietnamese businesses are thriving in Baton Rouge; says that blacks don't patronize black businesses, "your own people are not going to support you"; discussion of race relations, he thinks blacks don't protect each other from whites and instead attack each other; warns interviewers not to take youngsters for granted, "they going to try to kill you, see"; stories about local businesses being robbed, store owners being shot; people want to "make a fast dime" and "don't have sense enough"; it doesn't make sense that the black businesses are failing; he thinks business owners don't understand competition in pricing; back in the 1940s and 50s, things were cheaper, some business owners knew how to run a business properly, others "just want to take all, don't give none"; another funeral home owner Miss [Jenny?] who had a booming business because she provided excellent service and was compassionate; Desselle Funeral Home has been successful because they know how to treat people; interview interrupted by Cooper's coworker, Ronald; Cooper explains why Henry and Goods are there to interview him; he describes a typical work day; they used to have an ambulance service that ran three times per day to Charity Hospital in New Orleans; Cooper used to drive and would often be on the road from places like Gretna or Alexandria, then to New Orleans and back; his job now is mostly sitting around in case something comes up, but he's on-call 24 hours a day; before he got married in 1963, he lived in the funeral home; he's been working in funeral homes his whole life; Desselle's buried "about everything in Baton Rouge"; a bridge from Highland Road to West Johnson Street; Henry is from South Baton Rouge, he and Cooper discuss neighbors of Henry's like Cooper's cousin Lee and Duke Tilly; Cooper buried both of Tilly's wives; Reverend Eddie Johnson lives on the same street; Cooper many kin in the area including the Bassetts; eateries and grocery stores in the area of Highland Road and Margaret Street; Henry Sanford used to drive for them; some businesses made a lot of money; many nice houses but they are boarded up now; he's related to the Butlers and the Hatters, explains the families' relation; Cooper related to one of Goods' neighbors, Reverend Johnson; other relations of his and their nicknames; discussion with Goods on various family members, where they live, cars they drive, etc.; a store was robbed and a woman shot to death one day as they were preparing for a funeral; where businesses now stand on College Drives used to be "nothing but weeds"; suggests interviewers contact Albert Domino who knows a lot of former businesses in the area; tape cuts off.

**TAPES:** 1 (T1026)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 1 hour, 29 minutes

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** 39 pages

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Correspondence; interview data sheet; excerpt list; two handwritten indexes (2 pgs each)

**RESTRICTIONS:** None