

## T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

### ABSTRACT

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Theresa Lee

**COLLECTION:** 4700.2666

**IDENTIFICATION:** Mossville, Louisiana resident

**INTERVIEWER:** Chelsea Arseneault

**SERIES:** Mossville History Project - Field Interviews

**INTERVIEW DATES:** May 26, 2016, January 11, 2017

**FOCUS DATES:** 1960s-1990s

### ABSTRACT:

#### **Tape 4623, Session I**

Family names and origins; father from Killona, mother from Patouville area, outside of Jeanerette [Louisiana]; father a pastor, Reverend Preston Earl Whitehead; mother's name Sarah NewChurch Whitehead; parents met when father moved to Jeanerette, where he worked at the sugar mill; had ten children together, she is the third; two of her siblings have passed away; siblings' names; Lee graduated from Francis Marion Boley High School, and it was there she saw future husband Richard for the first time; didn't meet again until they were juniors at Grambling; recruited by Racine Wisconsin School District after she graduated from Grambling in 1968; she was born April 9, 1946; talks about her grandparents; father's mother, Maggie Paul Johnson Whitehead made her own wine on the porch and had a garden and chickens; continues to discuss siblings; daughter Dawn Holman speaks; Lee very close to brother Paul, who passed in 2010 along with several other close family members; Paul a graduate of Grambling, was also in the army, stationed in Germany, and later worked in the school system; all her siblings either graduated trade school or college; strict upbringing—had to go to church and Sunday school; father worked in a sugar mill; eating the fat, purple sugar cane her father brought from work; mother a housekeeper; father became Pastor Emeritus at Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Jeanerette; considered Jeanerette the “city”, and mother's hometown of Patoutville the “country”; mother's side of the family butchered hogs; Aunt Elzie Jenkins took care of butchering and cooking dishes like okra, boudin and cracklins; mother a seamstress, and made all their dresses; pictures of her mother and husband Richard's mother, Elaine; Richard's father, Richard Lee Senior loved beagles; describes her hometown as “God-fearing,” and growing up there as the “village raising a child;” had a phone in the home growing up; mother president of usher board at church; different fundraising events; Lee touched by Lord's Supper Day tradition held once a month in the Baptist church; thoughts on being a pastor's child; earliest childhood memory was winning pin the tail on the donkey; attended Canal Street Elementary, walked about a mile to school; favorite teacher Mrs. Rochon, the English teacher; a cheerleader and basketball player in high school, also participated in state choir; graduating class still close, just had their

fiftieth class reunion; first time she saw Richard he was on crutches; she got the T.H. Harris Scholarship to go to Grambling; entertainment options for teens in Jeanerette; teachers more businesslike when she was in school; parents' education; protests at Grambling; brother Paul involved, and many students who were out protesting couldn't pass their classes; when Paul returned home, their father said it was education or the sugarcane field, so Paul soon returned to Grambling; first impressions of Grambling; thought the rolling hills beautiful; memories of the dormitories; dorm matron fondly referred to as "Moby Dick;" running into Richard again; engaged the summer before she left for Wisconsin; flying to New York to watch him play in the Bronx Sugar Bowl; documentary of that game, *1<sup>st</sup> and Goal in the Bronx*; memories of Eddie Robinson, Richard's coach at Grambling; a philosopher and a disciplinarian, known to get the best from his players; Richard the only three-time team captain during Coach Rob's legacy; Richard became a defensive player when he was drafted by the Patriots; Johnny Comeaux instrumental in getting Richard to Grambling; Richard's personal qualities that helped him succeed; responsibilities as team captain; at Richard's death, the G-Men Gathering from Grambling changed their name to the Richard Lee G-Men Gathering to honor him; more memories of Coach Robinson; invested in his players and interested in their education; pros were coming to the black schools for their athletes; Mossville high school ring was pawned, but someone found it and knew it was his, because of the size; Richard's memories of Mossville High School—he used to talk about Mrs. Rogers, an English teacher there; LaSalle Williams his high school coach; winning the state championship in the shotput on crutches with a broken leg; experiences with integration and racism; differences between Grambling and McNeese; when she was a senior in college, she remembers students saying, "Don't go to sleep tonight we're going to burn it down."; she was focused, and wanted to graduate and get a job; hearing war updates during Vietnam; remembers Jeanerette local Sylvester Wright being killed in friendly fire; family veterans; brother Paul stationed in Germany for two years; story of how she got the job in Racine; adjusting to life in Wisconsin; worked at Lincoln Elementary, setting up the library; Richard's proposal—asked her father's permission, and that's why her father liked him so much; before he could marry her, he had to help paint their house; gave the engagement ring to Paw Paw Lemelle for safekeeping; memories of his side of the family; Richard's time with the Patriots; everything looked good, but at the end of the pre-season, they put him on waivers; Coach Clive Rush tried to court him into staying and took him for a steak dinner; returned to Mossville and worked at Conoco until he retired, September 14, 1999; his work at Conoco; she taught at Sulphur High School and retired in 2003; story of Richard Lee Senior losing his dog tags during WWII; found washed up on shore in New Zealand in 1986; Richard thirteen years old when parents divorced; built their home in Mossville in 1973; does not view the Sasol buyouts as a good thing; daughter Dawn Holman says, "It feels like slavery again;" spent forty years in Mossville, and leaving it was even more difficult because her husband had passed away; opinions on how the buyouts were handled; what made Mossville special; Richard a member of Acadiana Beagle club; also had a garden and raised chickens; kept a refrigerator in the back next to his barn where he had medicines for his dogs; close to his passing, he gave away all his dogs, and also the greens from his garden; first G-Men gathering started in 2008 in Richard Lee's backyard in Mossville; Mossville close knit because people loved each other; memories of their neighbors on Prater Road; Mossville Social and Civic Club a non-profit Lee is involved in; Johnny Comeaux Award; memories of President Obama's election; James Rigmaiden a community leader, also a math teacher at Mossville; Richard used to use the phone at the Conoco station on the Old Spanish Trail to call her in Jeanerette when they were courting; protest at

Rougeau's grocery store; lived next door to the Paradise club; first buy-outs in Bel Air; how the community changed over the years; story of how their house burned down; holiday traditions; what Mossville means to her.

### **Tape 4674, Session II**

Introduction; history of the Mossville Social and Civic Club; club activities; local musician Booze Chavis would play at their events; club's role in canvassing for President Obama; the Johnny Comeaux Award now Richard Lee/Johnny Comeaux Award; the Catherine Marie Jourdan Victorian Scholarship named for club's first secretary; spelling of Booze Chavis; house fire in 1983; community rallied to help them in various ways; churches also helped out; as a Mossville Pirate, Richard won awards for shotput; different awards he received at Grambling, including "Best Dressed Athlete"; also member of the Eastman Kodak 1960 College Football All-America team, and won W.A. Scott II Memorial Trophy; member of several clubs, including Acadiana Club, American Kennel Club, the Nation Rifle Association, and the Huttig Hunting Club; only three-time team captain under Coach Eddie Robinson at Grambling; Richard Lee's different nicknames; after buying funeral plot, Lee had prophetic dream of husband's death; many professional ball players gathered at his funeral; Mossville Pirates were there in their jackets; this when the G-Men gathering's name changed to Richard H. Lee Junior G-Men gathering; Richard Lee's encounter with Howard Cosell; Lee confronted Cosell when he entered locker room at Grambling; CBS Sports documentary *1st and Goal in the Bronx*; Ernest Sterling and Richard Lee substituted themselves as tackles, only time in Coach Rob's career; Coach Rob's famous phrases; Coach Rob's actions, career achievements--"considered the man with the golden mind, vision, and determination."; musical talents and achievements of Mossville resident, Garfield Verdine; treasured stories of family's friendship with Verdine; brief discussion of some changes during integration; difficulty securing a home loan, even though their credit was good; after integration, many black athletes courted by white schools; lists people who have passed away since Sasol buyout; Lee reads an open letter she posted on Facebook, titled, "Dear Mossville."; closing.

**TAPES:** 2(T4623, T4674)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 2 hours, 57 minutes

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** 193 pages, total

T4623 (Session I) 168 pages

T4674 (Session II) 25 pages

**PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER:** Five photographs of interviewee taken during session one interview. Photographer Kyle Tanglao.

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Interview questions (5 pgs); Correspondence; Additional historical notes (9 pgs)

**RESTRICTIONS:** none