

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Wilhelmenia G. Thompson **COLLECTION:** 4700.1614

IDENTIFICATION: Retired schoolteacher, assistant curator of the Odell S. Williams Now and Then Museum of African American History in Baton Rouge, Louisiana

INTERVIEWER: Julia Rose

SERIES: McKinley High School Oral History Project – Social Organizations

INTERVIEW DATE: June 20, 2002

FOCUS DATES: 1950s - 2002

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3199, Side A

Introduction to follow-up interview with Thompson; Green is her maiden name; B.A. from Southern University, master's degree in administration supervision; 1960 graduate of McKinley Senior High School; origin of her involvement with New St. Luke Baptist Church and the Odell S. Williams Museum; now retired from teaching and active in the church; Thompson has family in California and Louisiana, takes care of her elderly mother; member of New St. Luke Baptist Church since her early childhood; the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame, a museum located in the former Lincoln Theater; memories of the old McKinley Theater and the Lincoln Theater becoming more popular; recent news coverage for event at the Hall of Fame where Rev. Theodore J. Jemison spoke; Jemison's son curates the Hall of Fame; Thompson's thoughts on Magnolia Mound Plantation museum; describes house she lived in on Royal Street across from large warehouse in 1950s; neighborhood was mixed race; interstate came through, broke up the neighborhood; description of Ridley's Alley, one street destroyed by interstate; neighborhood grocery store, Red and White, where she charged things to her mother's tab; attended Reddy Street Elementary School; her Sunday school teacher, Millie Barton, had her reading by age four; schools were segregated then; downtown department stores on Third Street; segregated customer service and lunch counters in the stores; she was oblivious to segregation as a child; annual Easter week street fair attracted people from all over; races mixed on the fairgrounds but were seated on rides separately; men's baseball games took place on the same vacant lot as the fair, white and black players in numbered uniforms; recalls a priest who broke his ankle sliding in to home plate; she and her sisters started selling water to spectators for a nickel; Joe Ridley was a prominent citizen; an icehouse on Myrtle Street; black man named Mr. Bud who sold ice blocks; daily garbage pickup, all the garbage men were white; living close to the School for Deaf and communicating through the fence with the students; Mr. Douglas, supplier of hair products to black beauty shops; Desselle Funeral Home was the only one in the neighborhood; buying pickles at another neighborhood grocery with an Italian name; apartment houses in the vicinity of the Italian grocery; Franklin Press on the corner of Highland Road and Julia Street; Frazier Vocational Technical School was built on vacant lot where fairs once held; her mother, Lena

Robertson, worked in Bonanza cafeteria, started as a dish washer; was so instrumental in backing up the main chefs that she got a large raise after returning from a vacation; mother eventually opened her own restaurant called Allen's Café, first on East Boulevard, later moved to Terrace Street; menu was soul food; mother's former boss from Bonanza offered her "all kinds of money" to come back, but she made better money with her own business; Thompson helped at the café in the evenings; after retiring in 1977, her mother worked with battered women; the educational level, marriages, and other details about her two sisters, Mary and Lea Dean; describes the five generations in her family; when she was a child, she heard a lot about the NAACP; participation in National Education Association (NEA) and Louisiana Education Agency (LEA); encouraging coworkers to use the credit union; first teaching job at Springfield High School, an all-white staffed school; her mother and husband discouraged her from taking the job; she car pooled to the school with three other teachers from a nearby black school; later transferred to Albany Springfield Junior High; she taught English and business subjects; description of Springfield High's principal, Merlin St. Cyr; troubles she had with white students: one refused to call her Mrs. Thompson, another constantly asked to borrow money; Springfield High had a relatively peaceful transition to integration; next teaching job at Albany Springfield, a fully integrated school;

Tape 3199, Side B

As the first black teacher at Springfield in the late 1960s, felt she had to be a perfectionist in looks and actions: "I was just like a model. Every day, from head to toe"; recalls how white students came to accept her, for example, being willing to eat a sandwich that she offered; she spent a lot of money on clothes at Gus Mayer's; lessons she learned from her mother about clothing, grooming, and keeping a clean home; ways her mother motivated her daughters to clean their rooms; recalls some of her mother's favorite sayings and how they come to mind in current circumstances; worked at four schools in Livingston Parish and three in East Baton Rouge Parish; strange feeling when working at her alma mater, McKinley High School; taught at Lee High School in Baton Rouge, then Denham Springs Junior High, then was bumped to Southside Junior High; retired from Southside after twenty-two years; clubs she worked with at Southside; running into students who are grown up now; she especially enjoyed teaching typing and English; her philosophy of teaching English and allowing leeway for word usage depending on the situation; neighborhood used to be more focused on church activities; parents used to intervene less in teacher/student relationships; decline of teachers' rights during her tenure; she never paddled a student but it was allowed; her experiences being paddled as a student had no effect on her, she did what she wanted to do anyway; recalls turning away from a paddling one day when she had been well behaved; neighborhood used to be safe, slept with doors unlocked; museum serves as a temporary refuge; South Baton Rouge and the downtown area are coming back to life; on the possibility of more changes coming, "Go with the flow. That's my motto"; conclusion.

TAPES: 1 (T3199)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 9 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 58 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Correspondence; Interview notes; Photographs (2)

RESTRICTIONS: None