

## T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

### ABSTRACT

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Arthur Kenneth Lee

**COLLECTION:** 4700.2583

**IDENTIFICATION:** Mossville, Louisiana native; Vietnam veteran; Grambling State University alumnus; retired from Citgo and Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Office

**INTERVIEWERS:** Chelsea Arseneault

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

**INTERVIEW DATES:** September 30, 2015; November 1, 2015

**FOCUS DATES:** 1950s-2000s

### ABSTRACT:

#### Session I Tape 4531

Lee currently lives in Gillis; talks about immediate family, parents divorced during his childhood; father's emphasis on getting good grades in school; family's idea of "educating about ignorance" to make kids work hard for better opportunities; as adult, Lee ran a club called The Pub, worked in law enforcement and for the federal government; jobs as youngster allowed him to save enough money for a car while still in eighth grade; Lee instilled value of education in his own children; Mossville community support of youth sports; Lee and his brother both set shotput records; capturing wild horses as a child; Lee's compassionate approach as resident deputy in Mossville; Mossville community raised children as a village; mother's relatives, the Lemelle family; grandfather Jim Lee was head of the black stevedores; family ownership of drive-in movie theater; union troubles at local plant led to killing; ran popcorn machine at family theater; getting whooped by aunt; buyouts by Conoco and Sasol gave him a chance to upgrade his standard of living; will cherish his Mossville memories; father's emphasis on good report cards for Lee and his friends; education success stories in his family; Lee is related to Towners; uncles owned Towner Brothers Cabinet Shop; use of recycled materials in Lee's home; having to finish chores before going out with friends; memories of Mossville canteens; camping with uncles; "skiing" by riding in a washtub while horse pulled it across the dynamite hole (swimming hole); washing cars in dynamite hole; didn't have running water in Mossville until town got federal grants when he was a grown man; served on water board; development of water system; federal grants for Mossville sewage system; community sharing of commodities such as televisions and cars; community supported success of its young people; all-American basketball player from Mossville who won enormous trophy; family property; favorite foods grandmother cooked: peach cobbler, cornbread and milk, pork ribs, gumbo, blackberry and mayhaw preserves; Aunt Kim taught him to play football; Aunt Julia "worked like a man" in the plant after she was widowed, which Lee admired; career success of his hardworking contemporaries; vegetables

grown and livestock on grandfather Edward Lemelle's farm; sharing food within community; Lee still knows how to slaughter hogs; grandfather "put chickens on death row" when he was preparing for slaughter; cooking chickens in gas-powered outdoor kitchen during Hurricane Audrey; electricity and gas service and cost; conflicting stories about how his family came to Mossville: great-great-grandfather might have been the pirate Lafitte's cabin boy slave; family has gold pieces and cuff links said to have been owned by pirates; great-grandmother washed clothes in bayou for logging camps; aunts were midwives; paternal grandmother's people from Ethiopia; other family story is their people came off Robert E. Lee's farm after Civil War; family acquisition of land; Creole families in Mossville; Papa Lemelle was a cook; explains family name "Cotloeng"; confusion about relations, intermarriage; musicians who played Mossville on the Chitlin Circuit; influence of Coach Williams; how Lee became security guard at Citgo; worked several jobs simultaneously before becoming disabled.

## **Session II**

### **Tape 4536**

Federal grant to establish Mossville water system in early 1970s; Lee joined water board; concern over Mossville's shallow wells; Mossville "brain drain," people leaving community for better job opportunities; considers buyout a blessing because he could upgrade his standard of living; some people didn't want to take buyout because they still owed money on federal grants received after Hurricane Katrina; disputes within families about whether to take buyouts; no accessible medical care in Mossville for elderly residents; worries about terrorist attacks on local oil business; plant leaks and warning systems; memories of Coach Eddie Robinson at Grambling; housing arrangements while at Grambling; mostly known as "Richard's little brother" because older brother was a big man on campus; all-American athlete Johnny Comeaux helped recruit Richard Lee to Grambling; relationship with Bobby Blue Bland, who played Paradise Club; description of Chitlin Circuit; big name performers at Paradise Club; publicity for shows; working at Paradise Club; friendliness and accessibility of performers; subsequent businesses on site were less successful than Paradise; Etta James was his favorite performer; Mr. Valery and Wes Montgomery, who ran Paradise; male role models in community; local connections to Edwin Edwards; generosity and neighborliness of Mr. Valery, who shared water before Lee family well dug; Lee's dad and uncle built family home in their spare time; sauce piquant; listening to music outside clubs when too young to enter; learning trendy dances, such as the watusi and funky chicken; hanging out at local canteens; local barber shops; hair trends; women's hair salons; Lee's ownership of The Pub; Pub closed over property line dispute; realization in 1970s that the water table was polluted; Grandfather's saying "I'm not going to bend my neck so you could ride my back"; wants equal rights after fighting for the US in Vietnam; struggle for respect while working in law enforcement; served as resident deputy in Mossville for about seventeen years; hostile incident where passer-by treated Lee as if he must be working for a white man, rather than being the property owner; emotional reaction to Obama becoming first black president; memories of Martin Luther King, Junior; decision to pursue law enforcement partly inspired by King's speech; ways he tried to persuade juvenile offenders to mend their ways without jailing them; incident where he persuaded a murder witness hiding in Mossville to cooperate with Houston police; how he got nickname "Killer"; kindnesses like feeding hungry perps on the way to jail or allowing them to use his phone; many of the people he arrested willingly became his informants; incident where man involved in domestic violence case would allow only Lee to take him to jail; local musicians; mildly rowdy neighborhood bar called

The Cowboy Inn; grandmother made Lee rouse drunks that passed out in their cars in front of church on Saturday night and were still there Sunday morning; local musician Garfield Verdine sometimes subbed Lee's orchestra class.

**TAPES:** 2 (T4531, T4536)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 3 hours, 57 minutes

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** 113 pages  
T4531 (Session I) 53 pages  
T4536 (Session II) 60 pages

**PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER:** Four photographs taken during Lee's interviews for the project, including photographs of Lee being interviewed at oral history day. Photographer Kyle Tanglao.

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Biographical data form; Correspondence; Interview questions (10 pgs)

**RESTRICTIONS:** per interviewee's request, all references to Vietnam are omitted, except stating that he left and came back