T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Fred C. Matthews, Jr.   **COLLECTION:** 4700.0701

IDENTIFICATION: West Feliciana Parish native; Longtime employee of Standard Oil
(Exxon) Refinery; Publicity director for Baptist churches

INTERVIEWERS: Rudolph Henry, Michael Goods, Nedra Carter, Khary Carrell

SERIES: McKinley High School Oral History Project – African American Businesses

INTERVIEW DATES: June 26, 1996   **FOCUS DATES:** 1920s-1960s

ABSTRACT:

Tape 1028, Side A
Introduction; born in West Feliciana Parish, February 1, 1906; father was minister, mother a
homemaker; lived in West Baton Rouge Parish for twelve years, then moved to Baton Rouge in
1920; sisters were public school teachers; childhood spent on farm; attended night school to
finish high school; Standard Oil (Esso, later Exxon) was the biggest business in Baton Rouge
when he moved there; areas of Baton Rouge that used to be farmland; Matthews never had time
to "hang out," always had a job; influx of people leaving farms to come to Baton Rouge in
1920s, increased competition for jobs; boll weevils destroyed farming; African American doctors
and dentists in Baton Rouge in 1920s; McKinley's predecessor in the 1920s was Baton Rouge
Colored High School; Matthews' wife was in first graduating class from McKinley in 1928; wife
died seven years ago after fifty-five years of marriage; McKinley graduates made impact in Baton
Rouge as educators; education of Dr. Leo S. Butler at Blundon School in Baton Rouge, then
Howard University Medical School; Butler's fame and competence among whites and blacks;
community center now named for Butler; black cafes during segregation: Ever Ready Café,
Delpit's Chicken Shack, Ross Soul Food; black cafes put out of business by fast food restaurants;
Matthews was more concerned with the economic opportunities of integration than the social;
son involved in civil rights march from Southern University to the State Capitol; son is now
executive director of Chicago YMCA; special honor given to son in 1991 as outstanding citizen
of Chicago; Matthews' son's wife and two daughters graduated from Southern University; two of
Matthews' granddaughters work for banks, one in Dallas, the other in Atlanta; one of his
granddaughters moved back to Baton Rouge; Matthews worked in the research department of
Standard Oil for nearly forty years, where he was in charge of forty black workers; Matthews'
team responsible for providing chemists with correct chemicals; catalytic cracker unit built in
1941 to manufacture high octane fuel for airplanes; before the catalytic cracker, used more
primitive ways to refine oil, such as coke stills; early products manufactured by Standard Oil;
researchers discovered better refining techniques; new refining techniques brought productivity
up from 10,000 barrels a day to 250,000; new techniques required fewer, but more educated,
workers; improvements in refining between 1915 and 1940; development of synthetic rubber

when World War II cut off supply of natural rubber from Indochina; Baton Rouge had world's first catalytic cracking unit, allowing Standard Oil Louisiana to supply most of America's World War II airplane fuel; job advancements for African Americans at Exxon over the years; Matthews was the highest ranking and highest paid African American at Exxon; discrimination in salaries between black and white workers; Civil Rights Act ended salary discrimination; now Exxon has African American workers at every level;

Tape 1028, Side B
Technological improvements meant Standard Oil needed ten men where they used to need 100; control room as nerve center of unit; control room operator can see any trouble occurring on the unit; research is the most dangerous department, because things done by trial and error; half the workforce had to leave when new units built; push for workers to take early retirement; Exxon's annuity plan; African American businesses that were once on East Boulevard; people who left farms for Baton Rouge used to buy their homes; almost nobody wanted to rent; Matthews built his house in 1942, before his induction into the army; Matthews still involved in doing publicity work for Baptist churches; people forced to move when Interstate 110 built, but many of them better off because they got money for unstable houses; Matthews profited from the interstate by buying some houses and moving them; Matthews does not smoke, drink alcohol, or milk; his philosophy is do your best every day, and at the end of the day say your prayers, go to bed, go to sleep, and leave the rest for the lord; adversity such as storms, fires, or being displaced by freeways can change the course of your life for the better; we all have to accept each other's faults; trying to anger opponent so they will lose; mixed leadership capabilities of black ministers; possibility that church burnings are politically motivated; unnecessary clamor about prayer in school, when people can pray anywhere, briefly and privately; proliferation of fast food places put black restaurants out of business; work ethic of Asians who immigrate to America; Matthews worked at McKinley High School on pilot program to reduce dropout rates; Matthews' recommendations to the school board that every school have a PTA and McKinley get improvements for accessing campus; Joseph Delpit's work on improving McKinley's drainage; Matthews a company clerk in the army, served in the South Pacific during World War II; Matthews' work as commissioner in charge of voting for twenty-five years; Matthews originally denied due credit for his contributions to Exxon because he was black; Exxon honored Matthews five years after he left the plant with an extensive interview and two-page spread in the Exxon newspaper; other African Americans in high positions at refinery; James Walton, a black foreman who was in charge of moving heavy machinery; end of interview.

TAPES: 1 (T1028)   **TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 1 hour, 26 minutes

 # PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 42 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Correspondence

RESTRICTIONS: None