

**T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection**

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERVIEWEE NAME:** Edward "Butch" Lemelle, Junior      **COLLECTION:** 4700.2579

**IDENTIFICATION:** Edward "Butch" Lemelle, Junior was raised in Mossville, Louisiana, where he spent most of his life.

**INTERVIEWER:** Jennifer Abraham Cramer

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

**INTERVIEW DATES:** September 24, 2015; November 6, 2015; January 28, 2016

**FOCUS DATES:** 1950s-1970s

**ABSTRACT:**

**Session I**  
**Tape 4522**

Cramer thanks Lemelle for his family's support of Williams Center's oral history days in Mossville; born February 4, 1946, in Lake Charles, immediately brought home to Mossville; youngest of six children, only boy; has lived other places but loves Mossville best; sister Edward Julia is nine years older; father spoke French but only wanted to teach his kids dirty words; names of grandparents; mother's family migrated from Kipling, Louisiana to Mossville for better opportunities; maternal grandmother was carpenter, grandfather did timber work, gardening, raising animals, sold coal; grandmother did more outside work while grandfather cooked and watched kids; Lemelle's uncles all learned carpentry from their mother; grandmother product of slave and Irish slave owner; location of Kipling, Louisiana; creditors in Westlake for groceries; community butchering of hogs in November and December; grandfather dug pit in yard to fill with ice and preserve meat; canning okra and tomatoes in jars; family has always had plenty to eat; grandfather stressed family unity; niece later donated grandparents' land to Mossville Truth Tabernacle Church; grandmother considered her land holy ground; builder couldn't stand to demolish grandmother's house, so buried it in a hole; paternal grandfather lived in New Iberia, French family; paternal grandmother died when father about seven years old, possibly from miscarriage; father left to mostly fend for himself after mother's death; father began work on an oil platform at age fourteen; oil rig owner's wife realized he was a distant relation, brought Lemelle's father inside to do house and childcare work; Lemelle's father stayed working for family for seventy years; mean people Lemelle's father lived with as a child for seven years; Mossville was extremely close-knit, wonderful place to grow up but now families have died out or moved away; friends were like sisters and brothers in Mossville; pact to not court the sisters of your friends; pulling tooth by the moon cycle; planting by the moon.

## **Session II**

### **Tape 4545**

The name “Towner” taken from slave owner; family name Ilses; Grandmother Pots’ mother was a slave; family shame about slave background; father’s work in private homes; grandfather’s gardening skills; grandfather lived into his eighties; in later years, grandmother completely devoted to God, scripture and family; grandmother provided good example – never heard her and grandfather argue; Grandmother’s favorite scripture was Psalm 37:25, about the righteous not going hungry; pastor’s inability to have company demolish grandparents’ home after family donated the land to the church; instead, he tore it down himself and buried the house in a hole on the property; uncanny spiritual feelings from having Mossville Truth Church built right on the former site of grandmother’s home; Lemelle was present at grandmother’s death: “I’ve never seen death come so easy, and so relaxed”; mother also passed peacefully; location of Lemelle’s childhood home on Prater Road; remembers when Old Spanish Trail was rock and gravel; Old Spanish Trail stretches from Florida to California; gypsies traveling on OST announced themselves with bells; kids scared of gypsies and hobos; sister Julia claimed to see a gypsy go up a tree and never come down; Brimstone trail that ran to Sulphur to the sulfur mines; building and naming of Prater Road; building roads with horses, wagons and sleds; beloved Uncle Elic; names of companies doing business in Mossville during Lemelle’s childhood; extension of Prater Road; geographic boundaries of Mossville; town parks during segregation; Conoco’s earlier land purchases from tax-exempt locals at sub-market prices; Conoco bought out Bel Air subdivision; family members who did military service; resentment of black veterans who fought in war but couldn’t get respect or decent jobs back home; Uncle Frederick vocally regretted his army service; principal that influenced Lemelle to value education; Uncle Frederick beat up sergeant to get discharged; Uncle Frederick took out his anger on hammers and nails; community leaders giving others a hand up; power in unity; loss of leadership in community; community leaders like Josh Rigmaiden and Ham Reed who kept young people out of trouble; community voting power; Josh’s nephew James Rigmaiden later tried to lead but lacked unity; later people tried to triumph through radical means rather than wisdom; moving to Boulder, Colorado and attending high school at an almost entirely white school; felt extremely out of place after spending his first fifteen years in all-black world; Lemelle’s advice for staying out of trouble; topics they plan to cover next time.

## **Session III**

### **Tape 4557**

Josh Rigmaiden, Dallas Moss and other men who made decisions for the community; importance of having a sheriff who protected the community’s youth from getting into too much trouble; Mossville was a forerunner in punishing youth by making them do community service; community members who also held civil defense positions; sometimes people got off with light sentences compared to what they’d get today for same offenses; women were influential in church, home and as educators; everybody participated in raising the children of the community; pain of losing Mossville community; currently only communicates with about 20 percent of former Mossville community; doesn’t even know where his former Mossville neighbors are now; Lemelle started tradition of family dinners in months that have five Sundays; dinners were an effort to bring family values to youth in family who were going morally astray; community was mostly interested in Calcasieu Parish and state politics; relationship between Valery Montgomery, owner of Mossville’s Paradise Club, and former Louisiana governor Edwin

Edwards; discuss possibility of interviewing Val Montgomery; Lemelle's father from French – speaking area; Val Montgomery's dementia might preclude interview; trickle-down nature of 1960s radical movement, from big cities to small towns like Mossville; Lemelle and his wife believed in upholding traditional values; new people moved to Mossville and diluted traditions; Mossville attracted people with its excellent black high school and reasonable real estate; as teen, Lemelle went out to Boulder, Colorado, to help relative with her small children; culture shock of leaving segregated South for Colorado in 1960; first time at Taco Bell – new to both tacos and entering through front door; Lemelle was one of six African Americans in a student body of 1500; no color barrier in Boulder High School; met a student on scholarship at Colorado University from McKinley High School in Baton Rouge; life changing experience to see races mix and get along in Colorado; he regrets returning to Mossville after only a year and a half; alludes to some trouble that sent him home; found out later that two cousins were professors at Colorado University; was living as a thug, not fulfilling his potential, till he met Leona, who became his wife; they met while Leona worked behind the bar at the Paradise Club; had a change of heart about his life when he saw Leona caring for her child with muscular dystrophy; Leona left him and went to San Antonio because he wasn't working; Lemelle followed her to San Antonio, convinced her to return with him to Mossville; births of their children, and death of six year-old Jackie; Leona had cancer, so had to have a hysterectomy after son David was born; Lemelles married June 11, 1967; showing photo of the Lemelles in 1970s at a Joe Tex dance; Lemelle reads poem he wrote for Leona on her seventieth birthday, after forty-four years together; Leona fell in love with Lemelle because he wasn't ashamed to kiss her in public or proclaim his love for her to others; a few details of their romance; humble first living situation together at Port Arthur; moved to a better house in 1969; first regular job was doing maintenance work at Livingston Shipyard; Lemelle adverse to dirty work, but Lemelle had done lots of agricultural jobs; at age seventeen, Lemelle worked with father in private home; fought with father about saving his money, father punched him in nose; father held back some of his money, taught him to save; father had hog named Son that Lemelle would ride; cried when they butchered Son; plans to meet for next session.

**TAPES:** 3 (T4522, T4545, T4557)

**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 3 hours, 27 minutes

**# PAGES TRANSCRIPT:** 138 pages, total

**PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER:** Six photographs taken during the interviews, including photos of Lemelle with wife Leona and interviewer Cramer. Photographers Kyle Tanglao and Rebecca Cooper.

**OTHER MATERIALS:** Correspondence; "Sons of American Revolution" document

**RESTRICTIONS:** none