

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Lucy Boyer Thomas

COLLECTION: 4700.1687

IDENTIFICATION: Long time resident of New Orleans' Ninth Ward; Hurricane Betsy survivor

INTERVIEWER: Nilima Mwendu

SERIES: Hurricane Betsy Survivor Stories

INTERVIEW DATES: November 21, 2003; December 10, 2003

FOCUS DATES: Session I: 1920s – 1965 Session II: 1965, 2003

ABSTRACT:

Session I

Tape 3340, Side A

Moved from Algiers to Chalmette when Lucy was a baby; Levee Board stole land from her father to widen canal, never paid him; family had cows, pigs, chickens, and terrible kicking horse named Jelly Bean; song her father used to sing to his old mule; drinking sheep's milk to prevent whooping cough or sometimes horse milk; selling milk in cans; Lucy born in 1923; Lucy's five brothers and one sister; Brother Joseph was one of the men who planted flag at Iwo Jima, never got credit for it; grew up in all black village of Fazendeville, near Chalmette; attended one-room schoolhouse for first grade; then went to McCarty School, Holy Redeemer and Albert Wicker in New Orleans for later grades; attended school through eleventh grade; old woman that scared them as children; fond memories of childhood neighbors; neighbor who made up a song about Lucy's daughter Bibiana; her father grew lots of vegetables to eat and to sell; fruit orchards where Kaiser Aluminum is now; cutting through a cow field, watching out for bulls; walking to school on train tracks, fear of the trains; mother was great seamstress; her mother threw a brick and accidentally broke a Syrian storekeeper's window, got taken away to mental hospital for six years; all the kids slept in one room; brothers helped her make first communion; older brothers and father took care of younger kids while mother was away; father's French cooking skills; bread old people used to make in cast iron skillets; father was French, from Lafayette; father's family, mix of French and black Louisiana Creole; Lucy was close to her Aunt Cecile; kids' chores; killing pigs; salting meat; iceboxes; rich neighbor who had tennis court and grew grapefruits and tangerines; frightened by snake in persimmon tree; healing vine called blackjack that father gathered in woods; uses of *l'hèrbe à malot*, or swamp root; children dosed with castor oil; cartoons they enjoyed as children, Howdy Doody and Betty Boop; brother Gabe's artistic rendering of cross; father died when she was nineteen; went to stay with Uncle Ed in California; Uncle Ed passed for white, so Lucy had to stay outside like a serving girl; studied nursing at UCLA; returned to Louisiana, worked at Charity Hospital; Friday nights at Charity:

“Everybody’s guts was cut out”; uncle in California kept every door inside house locked; Los Angeles apartment she stayed in where the landlady sent a man to her room as though she were a prostitute; terrible, unfriendly people of California; apartment where she caught someone coming in her room with a pass-key to steal from her; experiencing earthquakes; refusing to bathe a male patient; working at Charity; attending St. Catherine’s, a black church; eating delicious lunches with the well fed nuns; got married, moved to Ninth Ward.

Tape 3340, Side B

Married Francis Thomas at St. David Church; had first baby while living in Chalmette; moved to current residence at fifty-one years ago; met her husband while they both attended Grunewald School of Music; Lucy sang, Francis played tenor sax; sings “Our Father”; still sings at St. David Church; has five children and twelve grandchildren; husband worked at Kaiser Aluminum; husband died five years before interview; son Peter takes care of house, has power of attorney; whereabouts of other children; in 1952, Ninth Ward was more country; veteran and government housing in Ninth Ward; houses built by Good Citizen Insurance Company; used to be a canal outside her house, full of fish, frogs, turtles and snakes; had septic tanks instead of sewage; daughter Valerie saved small child who was drowning in septic tank; used to be lots of animals and songbirds; neighbors she remembers; oldest houses still standing; area developed because government built \$9,000 houses for veterans; Lucy points out tile work and other upgrades her husband made to house; women in the neighborhood stayed home instead of having jobs; when Lucy’s kids got bigger, she babysat and did housework for people; close-knit neighborhood; her good friend, Mrs. Garcia; church gives special scroll to couples married for fifty years; Lucy’s medical problems: breast cancer, lymphedema; escaping Hurricane Betsy flood waters; nobody had televisions then, some people had radios; warnings from neighbors about severity of Betsy; took cover in building at Derbigny and Tupelo streets; had to get eleven children through water five feet deep; floated children on mattress; rescued from two story building by National Guard; husband separated, wound up at the Port of Embarkation; Lucy and kids got ride on boat through river to an auditorium; water especially deep at end of Poland Street, where some people drowned; confusion over identity of drowned child, afraid it was one of hers; Lucy and eleven kids stayed for a week with a lady who offered to take them in; five feet of water ruined everything in the house; Lucy’s computerized stove; lady they stayed with after hurricane would steal Lucy’s groceries; Lucy’s six nephews and nieces were visiting during storm, giving her eleven kids to watch; memory of Kennedy assassination; mother-in-law said there wasn’t room for all those kids in her house after storm; husband helped National Guard rescue people during storm; army trucks; overcharged for bread in aftermath of storm; when water first started coming up, put kids in attic; at daybreak, preparing for departure.

Session II

Tape 3341, Side A

Introduction; spent night of Hurricane Betsy in attic; next morning got out through windows; boat that took children and mothers to end of Industrial Canal; baby son got separated, taken to Port of Embarkation; fear that son was among drowned children; husband Francis swam through the water to get help for his family; looking for a place to stay until water went down; terrible muddy state of house post-flood; joyous reunion with missing son; children that drowned; furniture and school uniforms ruined; received vouchers for sheets and towels; some people got

more help from government than others; received grant money and small business loan; didn't have flood insurance; mortgage note was through GI Bill of Rights; husband rebuilt the house himself; house is falling into disrepair again now; remodeling improvements Francis made after hurricane; Francis also worked on neighbor's house; Lucy missed out on a lot of grant money; after hurricane, stayed with lady who stole her food vouchers; people exploiting hurricane victims; volunteers took people with children in after storm; children's grandmother wouldn't take them in; unfair division of hurricane aid money amongst people and churches; missed out on money from church because she was staying outside of neighborhood initially; conditions in Municipal Auditorium after hurricane; anger that sister's mother-in-law wouldn't help her children after storm; sister's kids were up visiting, so Lucy took care of them during storm; post-flood stench; canal on Tupelo Street; many people took refuge in McCarty School during flood; got water from Abita Springs; had to get shots and fingerprints; conviction that Mayor Schiro ordered the canal at end of Florida Street to be busted, flooding Ninth Ward; blamed Schiro for drowning deaths; brother-in-law claimed to see destruction of canal; Schiro didn't do anything to help people during flood; busted levees also flooded Carolyn Park in Chalmette; water flooded in fast; white people in area got out of flood zone first; water rushing into house, furniture upended; National Guard rescued people in the area; veteran housing and Good Citizen housing; neighbors who lived in government housing; government houses cost nine thousand dollars; contacted senator to ask for memorial plaque for neighborhood; big shots also taking shelter in auditorium during storm; people who rescued others during storm; lots of people moved to Pontchartrain Park after Hurricane Betsy.

Tape 3341, Side B

Change in neighbors after hurricane; people in neighborhood no longer so friendly; neighborhood is going down; neighbors who used to live nearby; Good Citizen, a black-owned insurance company; Paul Simon, owner of Good Citizen, neighborhood bigwig; people no longer check on their neighbors; Lucy's kids look after her; problems in neighborhood.

TAPES: 2 (T3340, T3341)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 2 hours, 33 minutes

Session I: 1 hour, 33 minutes Session II: 1 hour

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 119 pages

Session I: 67 pages Session II: 52 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Interviewee questionnaire, correspondence, obituary

RESTRICTIONS: None