

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewees: **Buddy Blair**

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Interviewer: Pat Pollicoff

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

Comments: Buddy Blair was interviewed at the River Bend Country Club. His wife, Billie Blair, also participated in the interview. 14 Pages



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L-R: Billie Blair, Pat Pollicoff, Buddy Blair

*Transcript*

POLLICOFF: Lets start with a little bit of biographical information. Where and when were you born?

BLAIR: Born in Sugar Land on June the twenty-six nineteen twenty-nine. I am a native Sugar Lander, there is not too many of us left.

POLLICOFF: You were born and raised and still live here. Did you ever move away from Sugar Land?

BLAIR: Yes, I was in the Air Force during the Korean War.

POLLICOFF: You were born just before the Depression hit.

BLAIR: Yea, right.

POLLICOFF: Did your parents work here?

BLAIR: Yes my dad was a carpenter for the Sugarland Industries. He built a lot of the houses in Sugar Land. Mother worked for Imperial Industries in the dry goods store.

POLLICOFF: And what was his name?

BLAIR: Athel Vernon Blair. They were in Scotland and there is an Athol Blair, he is the only man who can legally have an army in Scotland.

POLLICOFF: That's interesting! How did your family get to Sugar Land?

BLAIR: My grandfather use to run the lumberyard in Sugar Land and my dad was a carpenter and I guess that's the reason. I don't know when my grandfather came. They built the house that we lived in between 1919 and 1922. We could never find any plots or plans for the house. I worked in the Engineering Department for the sugar company and I could never find any information about when the house was built.

POLLICOFF: Do you think your father built it?

BLAIR: I don't know. We lived in the house just to the south of their house. I went into the Air force in 1948 and came back in 1952. During that time my mother and father had moved in next door to take care of his mother and father. I moved in with them and lived with them until I went to work for the sugar company and then I took possession of the house. When they put the house up for sale, I bought it. So no body has ever lived in the house that except Blairs'. But that house burned down a couple of years ago.

POLLICOFF: I know that you rebuilt a beautiful home and still live there. Let me back up a little bit. Your Fathers name was Athel and your mothers name?

BLAIR: Was Nora Mae McMeans.

POLLICOFF: And was she from Sugar Land? Or where did she come from?

BLAIR: She was actually born in Stockdale, south of San Antone. I don't know how they met.

POLLICOFF: You talked about your grandparents. Did you have any extended family, cousins, uncles, aunts living in the area?

BLAIR: My mother's sister lived on Brooks Street. Her name was Coco, Mrs. McBrie.

POLLICOFF: McBrie, okay. What did they do?

BLAIR: He was a sugar boiler, for the sugar company. My father worked at Sugar Land Industries. My mother worked behind the candy counter in the grocery store for years. People would come in and shop for a nickels worth of candy. Now that sounds ridiculous. But they would have four and five pieces of candy for a penny. You could actually buy a five-cent candy bar.

POLLICOFF: What other families live near you?

BLAIR: My mother was Nora. Her sister was Nola. They were twins. Our family lived in one house and Nola's family lived in the other. My aunt and uncle were nearby. Norm Hughes worked at the sugar company and his wife worked for the Marshall Canning Company. She bought a brand new car. She walked to work, she would walk home, get her car drive down to check the mail at the post office, and drive back home put the car in the garage and walk back to work. Because she believed that the sun would tear the paint up on her car.

POLLICOFF: HA! Describe a normal day in Sugar Land in your childhood,

BLAIR: Oh Lord, we would get up go to school to play. I remember that blue Northers used to blow in. We would go to school in the morning barefooted with short pants on and tee shirts and freeze before we got home for lunch. It wasn't but a block. That's how much the temperature would fall in a short length of time. Then we would put on jackets and shoes and we would go back to school for the afternoon class. We had about an hour I think it was. Seemed like it. I came home for lunch.

POLLICOFF: What was school like? Tell me about the school.

BLAIR: Everybody had a desk and they had real good teachers that were all single women. The superintendent didn't hire any women who were married. That was typical back then. The women might get pregnant and might have to leave school. I had one or two male teachers in elementary school. One of them was M.B. Etheredge who later became one of the most decorated soldiers in World War II. He was in the same outfit that Audie Murphy. He was an officer and Audie Murphy was an enlisted man. They wanted to make a real impression so they awarded the most decorated service and Medal of Honor to Mr. Etheredge.

POLLICOFF: What grade did he teach?

BLAIR: Fifth grade.

POLLICOFF: What year would that have been?

BLAIR: About 1940 or '41. Just before the war.

POLLICOFF: Were you born at home or were you born at a hospital?

BLAIR: I really don't know I was real small at the time but I believe I was born at home.

POLLICOFF: (joyful laughter) I think that's a good answer. (both Pollicoff and Blair laughing). Tell me about the year that you graduated from Sugar Land High School.

BLAIR: It was 1947. We had a normal procession in the auditorium. One of the funniest things about that was my senior year in high school was that we had a young band director. We were all in last period of the day and he was cutting up and he says, 'You know when you get ready to get married you will marry somebody down in about the second grade.' I said, 'You're full of it.' But actually when I graduated Billie WAS in the second grade.

POLLICOFF: She was that much younger than you?

BLAIR: Ah-hu, nine years.

POLLICOFF: Did you know her family at the time?

BLAIR: No, she was an import, she came from Alabama.

POLLICOFF: In high school what did students do for relaxation and fun? Could you get into much trouble in Sugar Land?

BLAIR: No, you didn't get into trouble, because if you got in trouble in town, or at school you didn't need to tell your parents about it when you got home. They already knew! (chuckle) They had a pipeline that really worked. But the biggest thing about growing up in Sugar Land was that before you knew that you needed something, somebody had it there for you. That was Sugar Land.

POLLICOFF: Some people would say it's hard to live in a small town.

BLAIR: It's not it's the best.

POLLICOFF: It was like a big extended family.

BLAIR: Just like a big extended family, right. Fantastic... For fun we'd skate down Brook Street, down highway six to Humble Oil. That road out to the Humble Oil Camp was great on roller skates.

POLLICOFF: That's a long way.

BLAIR: It was a long way, but we had a schoolteacher who liked to skate and she skated with us.

POLLICOFF: Were the road all paved all the way to the Humble Camp?

BLAIR: Yes, black top. That was the only place that they had hard surface for us to skate on. Everybody said what about the highway traffic on highway six? Yeah we had traffic; we had to get out of the way about every hour or hour and a half and let a car go by.

POLLICOFF: So it is a little different now! What kind of extra curricular activities were you involved in?

BLAIR: I played football and basketball, was on the track team and I played tennis. The basketball team went to state two times out of the four years I was in high school.

POLLICOFF: You were before the Kent Hall era.

BLAIR: Right. When I was in over in Korea they wrote letters about Kenneth Hall running wild. And I said, 'That skinny little kid.' When I left home he was little. When I came back out of the service in '52 I saw what he did, fantastic.

POLLICOFF: Did you remember his family? Were you all friends with his family?

BLAIR: Oh yes, Curtis and his wife and his sister.

POLLICOFF: Straight out of high school, you were drafted?

BLAIR: No, I graduated high school in '47. I knew I wanted to go into the Air Force. I found out you could make an application to go to a certain technology school. I wanted to be an aircraft mechanic. So I joined in August of 1948 and become an aircraft and engine mechanic.

POLLICOFF: Where were you stationed?

BLAIR: I went in at Lackland, they moved us to reopen Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls. When you moved onto the base you would have a G.I. party. That's where you scrub the barracks from head to toe. Then the next day we would try to recover and before nighttime they would move us to another barracks. I think we moved four times in a row. Four days in a row. Cause they were trying to get all the barracks cleaned up. They would take the basic training during the day.

BLAIR: How long were you in the Air Force?

BLAIR: Four years, I joined up for three and I was in Korea waiting to come home when Truman and Congress decided I was having so much fun they'd let me stay another year.

POLLICOFF: Where in Korea were you stationed?

BLAIR: At one time I was about a hundred miles from the Manchurian border. I didn't know that, because when we were there we didn't know where we were. I have been reading books lately; I was part of an outfit that was flying air evacuation missions out of the Chow San Reservoir. That's where all of the Marines were trapped. We were flying the wounded out and then we evacuated with the troops as they came through Hungnam Harbor and we went back to Pusan.

Then we were reassigned to 6147 Maintenance Supply Corporation. Our combat airplane was a T Six Texan trainer. We had six phosphorus rockets mounted under the wings; air force personnel flew the plane with a ground force observer in the back seat. They flew kind of slow and low and the observer could spot targets and mark them with the phosphorous rockets and the faster jets in the P-51s would come over and bomb and strafe that area. They called us mosquitoes because the Chinese would like to have been able to swat us.

POLLICOFF: I bet, I bet. So what year did you get out of the Air Force?

BLAIR: 1952. I moved back in with Mother and Dad and started at the University of Houston. I went a couple of years and I was working at the Exxon service station when the Assistant Director of the Engineering Department came by one day and said, 'You going to the University of Houston? What are you taking?' I said, 'Engineering draftsman.' He said, 'Would you like to work for the sugar company?' 'I sure would!' So they transferred me over into the Engineering Department. I worked for them for forty years.

POLLICOFF: Did you finish at U of H.

BLAIR: No

POLLICOFF: You had two years of college?

BLAIR: Yep.

POLLICOFF: Was it typical that most of your high school classmates went to college?

BLAIR: No it wasn't very common.

POLLICOFF: Tell me about your job at the refinery.

BLAIR: I was an engineering draftsman. We did every kind of drafting work you could do. We lay out plants and equipment and systems and things like that. At one time before I retired, I was in charge of all of the locks in the entire refinery. I had the master key to get into everything.

POLLICOFF: All of the locks?

BLAIR: Bill Schwere went to work as legal council and a number of times he would call me early in the morning and say. 'Can you come unlock my office and let me go to work because I forgot my key at home?' So I would go over and unlock the door to let the vice president in. (chuckles).

POLLICOFF: That's great. Okay tell me when you met Billie.

BLAIR: I think we went together every day for about three years before we got married. She had to ask permission to go to school and finish up as a senior because she was too young.

POLLICOFF: When you got married.

BLAIR: When we got married. Billie how old were you when you got married?

BILLIE BLAIR: How old was I when I got married? I don't know. I was fourteen when I started going with you and we went together three years...

BLAIR: So it's seventeen

Mrs BLAIR: Seventeen years old.

BLAIR: She had to get permission from the superintendent to go to school; if she got pregnant he wanted to be the first one to know. When she graduated there were three in the class that were married, two of them were pregnant and she was not one of them. One of the worst arguments we got into was...

BILLIE BLAIR: ...because he said you may not participate in any extra curricular activities at all.

POLLICOFF: If you get pregnant.

BILLIE BLAIR: No, if you're married. Oh no, and I went to school a half a day, I did PE and English and physics with the junior and senior boys. I was the only girl.

POLLICOFF: That's great.

BILLIE BLAIR: Two of them went on to be college professors in physics.

BLAIR: And doctors



BILLIE BLAIR: Yes, Danny Miller and David Armstrong. Crazy, don't participate in any extra curricular activities!

POLLICOFF: (laughter) All right, let's see, so tell me about some of your classmates and favorite friends.

BLAIR: Well when I came back out of the service, Louise Stevenson married Wayburn Hall. Colleen Hall married and had two kids.

POLLICOFF: Most of the husbands went to work for Imperial at one place or another?

BLAIR: Some of them went to work for Humble like James Vavreka.

POLLICOFF: How many children do you have?

BLAIR: Got three, two boys and one girl. My daughter is oldest - Andrea Marie. Our two sons are Andy and Randy.

POLLICOFF: Andy, Randy and Adrea. That (giggle) is really hard to yell down the street.

BLAIR: She was named after me. Andrew... Andrea.

POLLICOFF: If you had a favorite memory of Sugar Land what would it be?

BLAIR: Oh gosh, the honor of serving on the City Council for sixteen years.

POLLICOFF: Well '59 is when Sugar Land incorporated. You were on the second council?

So that might have been '60 or '61. What made you want to run for council?

BLAIR: Jess Pirtle and TC Roselle asked me to come and run.

POLLICOFF: They must have thought a lot of you.

BLAIR: I was born in raised in Sugar Land and knew them from church and everything else.

POLLICOFF: What was an average day like working in the refinery?

BLAIR: One day I was supposed to go out into the power plant and measure some piping that we were drawing up and I walked on into the power plant and did it. Don Williams was the foreman of the power plant and said, 'Don't you know that you have got to report in to me before you go into that power plant?' 'Well Bruce Edwards is the chief engineer for this entire plant and he told me to do it and I did exactly what he told me to do. He didn't say go by and report to Don Williams.' He said, 'From now on (snicker) we'd like you to come by the office.'

POLLICOFF: (laughter). What was it like living in a company town and did it change?

BLAIR: It was fantastic. I mean...where else would a person, when he was in high school, go to work in a dry goods store and sell clothes? Also on a Saturday I'd go in to work and Sugar Land issued coupons for so much a day. And I'd burn millions of dollars worth of coupons.

POLLICOFF: Millions?

BLAIR: Millions, in a barrel. Nothing but a barrel and coal oil. Sit out there and dump them into the fire... start a fire in the bottom and dump these things in there and burn it. Burn that money. Like I said if you needed something before you knew you needed it, it was there. It was a feeling of comfort I guess.

BLAIR: I loaned to the Fort Bend Museum a set of the old company money; stamped, coins. They used metal coins before the coupons. One of the coins says good for one dollar on pay day only.

POLLICOFF: That is so interesting.

BLAIR: I want them to go to the Sugar Land museum if they know how to go over and get them. I loaned them to the museum to be exhibited.

POLLICOFF: I think that's great.

BLAIR: The last time I checked on them they weren't on display anymore. Probably something that might easy for them to get since they are not displaying.

POLLICOFF: Do your children still live in this area?

BLAIR: My daughter and granddaughter live with us in the house we built after the old one burned down. Four-bedroom home, why did we need a four bedroom home? Because we were going to have a daughter and a granddaughter come live with us and we have a guest room and our room. It's worked out perfect.

POLLICOFF: That's great. Your house is right there on Main Street, right on Oyster Creek?

BLAIR: The same spot as the house that burned down. A man drove up in driveway after the house burned and he said, "I will give you a hundred and fifty thousand dollars for it, just like it is.' I said, 'You haven't got enough money to own this property! There are too many years gone by, too much water under the bridge at this spot.'

POLLICOFF: Wonder what caused the house to burn down? Was it lightning?

BLAIR: Lightning struck. Lightning struck a tree in the back yard and it went across to a room air conditioner. Then went straight across the room to a television set and exploded.

POLLICOFF: Where you at the time?

BLAIR: We were in bed asleep. It was the day before Memorial Day. If our son had been there he wouldn't be here today, the youngest one. The fire went straight across over the top of his bed and blew up. He would have been crisp.

POLLICOFF: Was he still living at home at the time?

BLAIR: Yes, he was living at home. But he was with his children up in New Braunfels going down the river. We woke up and heard this terrible explosion and the first thing popped in my mind is one of the trees in the back yard had fallen over on the top of the roof. So I went up in the attic, nothing up there, no fire, nothing. I came back down stairs. Billie had gone to the front of the house. It was about 3 A.M. and as I climbed down the attic stairs Billie said, 'Honey I think we have got a fire. I smell smoke and I touched the door going into the back bedroom.' That was our son's room, and it was totally engulfed in flames.'

POLLICOFF: So you got out! Were you able to save anything at all?

BLAIR: Oh yea, we saved lot of stuff because the ceiling collapsed and fell down and the fire couldn't get out of the attic because of the metal roof that was there. I saved these glasses. I remember when I had the measles I watched them put a roof on across the street from our house. It had a metal roof and the light shining on it would hurt my eyes.

POLLICOFF: I'll be darned, You know Sugar Land had a minority population and most of them lived in Mayfield Park. What were relations like?

BLAIR: There was never any anything violent, we knew everybody in Sugar Land. Curtis Hall, Kenneth's dad, was a night watchman. He was the local law. If he walked up to a colored men with gun or a knife that he knifed somebody with and he'd say, 'Give me that gun, boy.' The guy would hand over the gun or the knife which ever it was, because they had respect for him because he treated them right.

POLLICOFF: So was there ever much mixing?

BLAIR: No they just did their jobs.

POLLICOFF: I know there are a lot of things we haven't talked about. When did you retire fro the refinery?

BLAIR: 1994. I have been retired for seventeen years.

POLLICOFF: Tell me the progression of your jobs; you started out as a draftsman...

BLAIR: I started out at the Sugar Land Industries as a gas jockey, attendant at a service station. Then I was Assistant Manager of the service station. Then I got promoted to go across the street to engineering. Stayed in the same area, at the same job all the time until I retired. Before we retired, they built the office building. The air condition was controlled from my desk in the Engineering Department.

POLLICOFF: So you were a popular man?

BLAIR: A lady would call me, 'I'm freezing over here.' 'Okay I'll take care of it.' A few minutes, they would call back, 'Everything is perfect you did it!' "I try!" Of course I didn't do anything the automatic controls took over. When it got to cold in one area it would turn down. It's a fact that there is an office building in Houston that has thermostats beside every woman's desk. They are connected to nothing.

POLLICOFF: NO!

BLAIR: Nothing, but if she moves the dial she thinks she has affected her environment. So everything comes out all right.

POLLICOFF: Did they do that at the sugar refinery?

BLAIR: No

POLLICOFF: Anything else that you would like to add about today?

BLAIR: I wouldn't change my life for anybody. In the Korean War Veterans Association in Houston and we just recently completed a project, patrolling the Veterans Memorial Cemetery on Saturdays and Sundays. Because we heard of an incident where a woman went out to visit her husband's grave. She had twenty dollars and a sandwich to eat for lunch. At knifepoint she was robbed of the twenty dollars and her sandwich. We heard about it and said that can't happen. For three years we patrolled that place.

POLLICOFF: I know that means a lot to all the families.

BLAIR: Fantastic life I have lived, like when my granddaughter graduated from high school, let's see in 1995 I had arthroscopic surgery and Doctor Valdez says you've got arthritis real bad in that knee. 'What do you do for arthritis?' He said. 'Well, when it gets bad enough you change it out.' It's like a set of tires and I had just about convinced myself to go ahead and have the operation to replace it. The day she graduated the principle fell off the stage broke both of his knees and had to have knee replacements on both knees and he died within a week of blood clot and it scared the hell out of me. I put up with the pain for five years and then finally, when I was 81 I told Billie, 'I've lived a good life if I die of a blood clot, fine. I am going to go ahead and have the knee replaced.'

POLLICOFF: So you had it replaced?

BLAIR: July 13, 2010.

POLLICOFF: And it's working pretty good now?

BLAIR: It's working fine.

POLLICOFF: I forgot to ask you one thing. Where did you and Billie get married?

BLAIR: In our house, that burned down, in the living room of the house.

POLLICOFF: Isn't that nice. Did you go on a honeymoon?

BLAIR: Oh yea, we went to New Braunfels and we spent the night in Seguin, the night of our honeymoon. We drove the next day to New Braunfels and we drove BACK to Seguin because she didn't put the suitcase in the car. It was on her side of the car and she didn't put it in.

POLLICOFF: (laughter) So she didn't have any clothes to change into.

BLAIR: So we drove back, but we went back to New Braunfels, spent the night there and then we went into San Antonio to visit some relatives.

Interview ends