

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Billy Allen Self**

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Transcriber: Robert Gaffney

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Transcript

WARE: When and where were you born?

SELF: I was born just up the road toward Brookshire beside Bessie Creek in Simonton, Texas in 1932.

WARE: Were you born at home or in a hospital?

SELF: I was born at home. My mother said it was three days before the doctor came.

WARE: Did she have a midwife?

SELF: I don't know about that. Me, my sister and my brother were all born up there at home.

WARE: What was your dad's first name, and what did your dad do for work?

SELF: William Allen Self, he went by Allen. He farmed, and we lived on the Roland place. They owned that land.

WARE: Did your dad grow primarily cotton?

SELF: No, we had corn and they planted alfalfa, and hay to feed the animals. They had mules, and milk cows, and some pigs. They needed mules to plant the crops with and plow. He mowed the hay with the mules, raked the hay with the dump rake and put it in piles. You'd take pitchforks and load it on the wagons, bring it in and put it in the barn. You used pitchforks again. (CHUCKLES)

WARE: Sounds like a lot of work.

SELF: You worked.

WARE: Where did you go to school?

SELF: Right there.



A dump rake is a hay rake mounted on two wheels consisting of a set of long curved steel teeth and equipped with a device for raising the teeth to dump the hay. A horse or mule did most of the work.

WARE: Next door to city hall (laughs).

SELF: This piece of property right here is where the teacher lived. One teacher, six grades, all in one room.

WARE: About how many kids?

SELF: Twenty-five or thirty, or it could have been less.

WARE: So, when there was harvest and all, did you take a break from school?

SELF: Well, the white children didn't. You worked when you got home.

WARE: Were there white and black children in the school?

SELF: No. If you go down the road toward Pool Hill, there's a white building on the right. That's where the blacks went to school.

WARE: Were there Mexican kids in your school?

SELF: No. There wasn't hardly none of them around here.

WARE: Your dad farmed. What did your mom do?

SELF: She was a homemaker. We had a big garden. She canned tomatoes and beans and corn and all this. We had plenty of stuff. All of us helped. When you got big enough to work, you worked.

WARE: Did you all go to church?

SELF: There wasn't any church here. They had a Christian Science and the Sayhalls, before they sold their land. They'd come by the house, pick us up, and go to Sunday School.

WARE: What kind of things did you do for social activities?

SELF: We'd just play around the house. That's about all we could do. We didn't go too much. We'd go to my mother's aunt over here at Orchard once in awhile.

WARE: What was the aunt's name in Orchard?

SELF: Aunt Minnie and Uncle Willie Hench. My mother's daddy lived over there.

WARE: What was your mom's full name?

SELF: Stella Mae Lewis. My mother was born in Collinsville, Oklahoma. Her mother passed away when she was little. Then they moved down here. I guess the whole Lewis family came.

WARE: What about your dad's family?

SELF: They were from around Wallis. They farmed potatoes at one time, I think, because they had an old barn up there and a potato separator. It set right by Bessie Creek. We had a little barn where we milked the cows.

WARE: Well, your grandparents were from this area. What was their name?

SELF: Willis Benton and Musetta Mae Self. They're buried in Wallis Cemetery.

We hunted a lot. In the winter time, we'd get some rabbits or squirrels or duck. About every Sunday, mother would kill two chickens. We had plenty of chickens, plenty of eggs. I milked three cows in the morning and at night. We'd sell eggs. She had a butter mold, make a pound of butter or two, took it to the store when they went.

WARE: She baked her own bread?

SELF: Well, she made quite a bit of it.

WARE: Did your mother sew your clothes, and did she quilt?

SELF: Her sister, Queen Rosetta Lewis, had a quilting frame, and she'd make shirts and what have you. Christmas stuff was always ordered out of a Sears catalog.

WARE: What are your siblings names?

SELF: I have two sisters. Erlene is the one right behind me and then Lewis 'Bo' Harvey, and then Janet. I am the oldest.

WARE: Do they still live in the area?

SELF: No. Erlene lives in Rosenberg, and my brother lives at Point Blank now by Huntsville. My little sister lives in Houston.

WARE: Do you farm?

SELF: No, but I worked on a farm. When my daddy quit farming after World War II, they tried to draft him. He was farming, so they didn't draft him in.

WARE: Who would have thought farming would be an advantage? (both laugh)

SELF: He worked for a guy that bought the Booketine place. After one of the floods, my daddy helped him get his guys out of the river bottom. He told Daddy, "I'm going to sell this property, and you got first choice." My daddy said, "I don't have any money. I can't buy it." It was \$40 an acre, and the guy pulled his saddle off his horse and gave my daddy the saddle.

A guy named Ed Paul bought the Booketine place. He had it a few years. Then in the forties, we moved to Fulshear. They built a house down here right before you get to the creek.

WARE: Where Weston Lakes is?

SELF: Weston Lakes. My dad ran that farm, and I worked there with him.

WARE: How big of a farming ranch was that, and did that ranch have a name?

SELF: Somewhere around 4,500 acres. They leased land out in the prairie to run cattle on it. It was owned by R. L. and S. B. Harris. Of course, they had five children, so one of the Harris boys was looking after it. The rest of the Harris boys was doctors and the one girl was a school teacher.

WARE: After you got out of the one-room school house, did you go to school anywhere else?

SELF: They bused us to Rosenberg. They had the one high school there called Simonton Independent School District. My daddy was a trustee on the board, and then when they decided to go in with Rosenberg, it all became Lamar Consolidated School District.

WARE: You finished high school in Rosenberg?

SELF: I lacked about a half a credit. I never did finish. I got drafted in the army. Right at the end of the Korean (War), in 1953. I spent my two years, and got out.

WARE: You didn't RE-up?

SELF: No. I came back home. I got married in 1963 and Kathleen (Kathy) and I lived in Alief.

WARE: What did you do for work after the war?

SELF: I stayed on this farm and ranched for seven years until 1962 until my brother talked me into doing construction.

WARE: You worked with your brother in construction?

SELF: Well, we worked at the same place, Walter M. Mischer, but he was at one place, and I was at another. I spent 25 years there. They changed the name of the company two or three times. Walter Mischer was a very wealthy man. I was a heavy equipment operator.

WARE: Easier than mules, I bet.

SELF: Yes. Even in the fifties, down here on Weston Lakes, they still used me. But those were, they called them "half-hands", or something. We got the ground ready, and they planted the cotton with the mules, plowed it and harvested it.

WARE: What are "half-hands"?

SELF: They did the work. We would plow the field for them, and get it ready and harrow it. They had about 34 head of mules.

WARE: Did you have favorite mules that you liked to work with?

SELF: No. I let those with little hands do most of that. In the winter, the mules ran in the pasture out there in the prairie. When it came time to start getting ready to plant, we'd go gather them and bring them back to the house.

WARE: When you were a child, where did your family shop?

SELF: Most of the time we bought at Daily's or Berkman's.

WARE: Right here in Simonton?

SELF: Yeah. We'd go to Wallace on Saturday nights and pick up some stuff over there. That's about all the places they had. There weren't any big shopping centers.

WARE: There were just little general stores?

SELF: Yeah, that's all. One of them is still here. The other one's been torn down, but they built this other building over there now. Harry Berkman and Abe Daily own this other one. The post office was in the middle of the whole building. Down at the end was a beer joint.

There were two cotton gins here. I worked in Ike Donegan's cotton gin. I ran the "sucker" that sucked the cotton off the wagon for one summer.

WARE: What was that work like?

SELF: Well, you pull it down, and it sucks the cotton up.

WARE: Like a vacuum?

SELF: Yeah. You just work it around over the cotton and it sucks it up.

WARE: Was the cotton taller than it is now?

SELF: No, it's about the same as it is now. I know sometimes when it gets real tall in low places, it gets lots of water. Usually it's about like two, two-and-a-half feet.

WARE: Did you pick the cotton by hand? Tell me about that.

SELF: Yes. Well, momma would fix us a sack with a strap on it. She had one. We just had to pick it. When the bolls on the cotton opened, it's dry, and the ends of them get real sharp. Prick your fingers. I wasn't too good at picking cotton, but I had to pick it anyway. We put it in the sacks and weighed it up. When you get about two thousand pounds, send the wagon, hook the mules to it, come to the gin and hand it off. We always saved the cotton seed. We'd take them back home and put them in the barn. When you milk, you would give the cows a handful. They ate the cotton seeds while you milk.

WARE: Did you use any other part of the cotton for anything on the farm?

SELF: No, when it was baled, it was sold.

WARE: I want you to describe a typical summer day in your childhood.

SELF: Well, you'd get up early 6 or 6:30. You'd get breakfast. You had to take care of the chickens or the pigs, milk the cow, do your chores. Then, if the cotton was still growing...I didn't do much plowing. Kids would play under the house or something.

WARE: Wait, under the house?

SELF: Yeah, the house we lived in was about (gestures 3 feet) off the ground. That was supposedly to keep the water out if it flooded. The Brazos River flooded quite a few times.

WARE: How long would your chores take?

SELF: It didn't take long, a couple of hours. In the evening, you had to do the same thing again. In the afternoon we had to gather the eggs, too.

WARE: Did you ever get pets?

SELF: Well, I wound up getting a little dog. That's the only pet we ever had.

WARE: Tell me if there was an emergency, how did you get medical care?

SELF: They had an old car. You'd have to go all the way to Rosenberg. There wasn't nothing here.

WARE: Do you remember any emergencies?

SELF: No. I can't think of anything bad that happened. There might be some cuts and bruises.

WARE: When you were growing up, there was total segregation between blacks and whites. There was no overlap in any way. Were there any problems between blacks and whites that you remember?

SELF: No. There wasn't nothing back then like it is now.

WARE: Simonton's kind of famous for its rodeo and its roundup. Did you ever participate in that at all?

SELF: No. That came along way after. We used to fish. My uncle and I would go down to where Valley Lodge is to their office, or the Hiltons had the place down there by the river.

WARE: Arthur Hilton? He let you go in there and fish? What was that place like?

SELF: They farmed and all that, but it was close to the river. We'd go down to the river and catch catfish.

WARE: Could you fish in Bessie Creek?

SELF: Oh, yes. It was a creek to start with, and then the Sayhalls built that dam that's there somewhere in the thirties or maybe in the early forties. I was still little.

WARE: Tell me about some of the major changes you've seen in this area in your lifetime.

SELF: They started when Mr. Vernon Frost came in and bought the Sayhall place, and later on, he bought the Roland place. I called him Mr. Vernon.

WARE: Did he run a ranch out here, like the Frost Ranch?

SELF: He had Brahman cows. They showed a lot of them at the Houston Livestock Show and different places.

WARE: So, he had a Frost Ranch here. But there was also a Frost Ranch on Highway 90 and another Frost Ranch way up near Arcola.

SELF: Vernon Frost was here. Pete Frost was up the road. He had a place up close to where the McCauley's had their ranch. There was a Frost Ranch at Sugar Land. That was Jack Frost.

WARE: They were brothers?

SELF: I don't know. I think Pete and Vernon were, but I'm not too sure about how Jack Frost fit in there.

WARE: Vernon Frost starts buying up all this land. How long did the Frost Ranch stay here?

SELF: Well, Bobby, one of the boys, still has some of the property. You see "Frost Properties for Sale."

The changes started with "Snake" Bailey and Valley Lodge. They bought the old convict corn barn which was a log building. They had it taken apart log by log. They took it down where the club house was and put it back together.

WARE: Do you know the history of that old convict corn barn? Did you ever see convicts in there?

SELF: I didn't. There was another building sitting over where they kept the convicts. They told me that the convicts kind of worked for private places around here. The Luke Seniors had a pretty good farm up here, too. Go to Bessie Creek, and up Stand Brook, you go back in there. He sold all his stuff in the 1950s or 60s and moved to Arkansas.

WARE: So, there's been a lot of change in this area even before subdivisions came in.

SELF: There's been a bunch of it sold and subdivisions built. When I was with Mischer, we did some work down on Tyler Road. They were going to put some roads and stuff in there for a subdivision.

Sam Guyler owned a bunch of this land. The road's named for him down there. He owns the land on the south side of the track where the Valley Lodge was. He owned some more land on up, past the Bookertine place and the Roland place.

WARE: Did most of these people have folks farm it for them?

SELF: Yes, they usually had people living there farming and getting 25%. I don't know how some of them farmed. Some of them farmed for their self. I don't know how they paid the guys.

WARE: What was Mr. Roland's first name, and about what year did the Roland place go away?

SELF: George. Sometime in the 1940s. He sold all that land to Vernon Frost. Roland was old, and his kids wanted to move to town.

WARE: Do you have children?

SELF: I have twin girls.

WARE: Either of them farm?

SELF: No. I told them, "You'd never make it if a depression came or if you have to live off the land and grow your own."

WARE: How did you meet your wife?

SELF: I was at a country western dance one time, and met her at The Esquire Club in 1961.

WARE: Has your wife ever worked?

SELF: Yes. She retired from the school district. She was the secretary to the Assistant Principal.

WARE: In Alief?

SELF: Well, she was there for a while. Then she went to Stratford High School in Spring Branch Independent School District.

WARE: What was the most fun you had in your childhood?

SELF: We always had some sort of games we played. Fishing, hunting, and relaxing.

WARE: Were your playmates primarily your sisters and brothers?

SELF: Mr. Senior had the one son, Luke Senior, Jr. (Sonny). Mr. Senior would come over. We had an old, coal-fired forge that the blacksmith's used to heat the iron. He'd bring his sweeps from his plows, heat them, and beat them out on the anvil to sharpen them. Sonny would come with him and we'd play.

WARE: Your dad did blacksmith work?

SELF: He did whatever was needed. Mr. Senior would come, and he'd do his stuff.

WARE: Describe that forge for me.

SELF: It was a big scrap thing and coal. There'd be little pieces, chips. They'd get it to burning, and they had a handle with a blower. He'd blow it, and then you'd lay your sweeps in there and it'd get red hot. You had your tongs. You'd take them out and lay them on the anvil, and hammer and beat them around the edges until they'd get sharp. You used them on your plow. When they'd get thick again, you'd do it again.

WARE: So, you turned the handle, and it kind of fanned the flame and got it really, really hot.

SELF: Yes, just like if you blew on it, it makes it burn.

WARE: It was coal? Where'd you get coal?

SELF: They bought it somewhere. Those blacksmiths, that's what they used. There was one down here where Weston Lakes is. They had one there, too.

WARE: So, you had to do all the repairs yourself?

SELF: You had to have the tools to do it.

WARE: You told me about a potato sorter and a forge. What other kind of tools did your dad have around that wouldn't be common today?

SELF: They went to the woods to cut wood for the winter, and he'd use his old crosscut saw. They sawed the tree down with that and cut it up in whatever lengths you needed.

WARE: Did you help with that?

SELF: I didn't do much sawing. I brought the wood in the house every night. My uncle and my dad would go down in the woods and cut it up. Then they'd haul it up back to the house. We'd stack it up.

WARE: Did your mother cook on a wood stove?

SELF: No, we had a kerosene stove. Where my grandfather lived, they had a wood stove for cooking. The only water in that old house was one faucet in the kitchen. That's all the water that was in it. If it was cold, they would set it on the back porch. If the north wind was blowing real bad, they'd have to stuff tiles around the doors. Lil Raymond had that old house. It was still down here at Pool Hill. I think she sold the place to these Chinese people a few years back. She passed away.

WARE: Tell me how the place was laid out.

SELF: The fireplace was on the north side. Then you had the back porch, then the kitchen, then the one room here. Off the kitchen was a stairway that went upstairs. Mom and daddy had that room. There were four rooms downstairs and two upstairs. Mom and daddy slept downstairs. My sisters slept downstairs in the living room mostly. I slept upstairs with my brother.

WARE: Was it a loft or actual rooms upstairs?

SELF: It wasn't a loft. The stairs went up and the room was right there. The other one was on the other side. The roof sloped like this (gestures). We were in the middle of the room. We studied by a kerosene lamp.

SELF: If you had to take a bath in the winter time, it'd be in a #3 wash tub.

WARE: What was the order of taking a bath? Did everybody get their own water?

SELF: Yes. After we set a tea kettle on the stove, heated it, and put the water in the wash tub, we'd pour more hot water in there, get your bath and dump it out. In the summer time, we had a windmill to supply the water. The top of the water tank was 20 feet or 25 feet above ground. Underneath it was the primes, and they enclosed it and put a shower head in there so in the summer time we took a bath out there. There wasn't no warm water, just air temperature.

Sometimes if the wind didn't blow all the time, we didn't have no water because the windmills had to furnish water to the cow pen, to the mule pen, and to the Roland house.

WARE: All of it was stored in that one cistern?

SELF: In that one tank up there. As long as the wind was blowing, the water was there. Sometime in the forties, Grandpa had that old Model T, and he quit driving it. Daddy got it, and they made it to where they could use it to pump water.

WARE: They used the engine from the Model T to run a pump for the water?

SELF: They put a pulley on with a wheel or something and fixed it over to the well, run the things up.

WARE: That's brilliant.

SELF: The railroad platform was here when they ginned the cotton, and they put it on to where they could load it in the boxcars. They had water there because the old trains could fill up with water.

WARE: So, water, no electricity. Did your folks ever get electricity at that house?

SELF: Sometime in the forties we got it. Then sometime after that, we got a telephone party line. If it rang, your ring would be two rings, or one long one, or one short one or something like that.

WARE: Was there an operator?

SELF: Yes.

WARE: All of a sudden, you've got running water, electricity, and a telephone. Life is good.

SELF: It was a little better, especially with the electric. They had what went through here called the Dinky. It came from Eagle Lake. It stopped in Wallis, and here. It had a mail car and a passenger car. They'd go through here in the mornings, go to Houston, and in the afternoon, it went back. It stopped in Fulshear, and if anyone wanted, it would stop at Flewellen, Gaston, Clodine and then Alief.



Shown is a train similar to the Dinky Train that ran between Houston and Victoria. The Dinky was a local freight train that ran on the S&P track along Highway 90A and included one or two passenger cars. -- photo courtesy of the <http://wateringholdclubhouse.blogspot.com>

WARE: Most of those towns are gone.

SELF: At Flewellen there never was a town. All that was there was a big cattle pen, and they had a siding where they loaded cattle on the train. Gaston was a signpost. Clodine was a farming community. Alief was a farming community.

We hunted and fished, especially if it rained a lot and the water was coming through that dam up there. You could go behind back there and catch little sun perch and stuff like that.

WARE: How old were you when you got your first gun?

SELF: Maybe twelve or something like that. I got a little single shot .22 rifle. Later on, I got a shotgun. I still got 'em.

There is an old will of my grandfathers. One of my aunts was disowned, and another one got the chickens and some land. It gave an uncle a bay mule and a black mule or something like that. My daddy got two pairs of mules.

Then, of course, these black people that lived on that place worked. You'd have to take them to the doctor. It's in the book...five dollars or something like that.

WARE: A ledger book?

SELF: Yeah. It's not really a ledger book. It's something like you carry in your pocket. You keep track of whatever.

WARE: Was that your grandfather's?

SELF: No, I think it's my dad's.

WARE: I want to thank you for talking to us.

Interview ends