

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Charles Vincent Court, Jr.**

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Interviewer: Diane L. Ware

Transcriber: Diane L. Ware

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20 Pages



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Transcript

WARE: Let's start with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

COURT: I was born in Saint Joseph's Hospital in Houston, Texas, 1934.

WARE: Okay, you've given me some of the history and I've read some of it. We're going to still go through this. How did your family come to live in Stafford, Texas?

COURT: My father, Charles Vincent Court, was raised in the Brazos River bottom, in a little town called Mudville. His brother-in-law, F. G. Cangelosi, married my father's sister, Katy. He came to Stafford and bought several hundred acres of land because he wanted to run a cotton gin. But he wanted to have a mercantile so he asked my father to come from Bryan to Stafford in 1919. My father was in school at Allen Academy and he'd dropped out of school. That's how he became a part of Stafford in 1919.

WARE: So he married your mother?

COURT: Yes. My father had a general store. You could buy most anything there, a saddle or whatever it is. But my father would have to make a trip to Houston, which was an all day trip, to get groceries to bring back to Stafford to sell in the store. He met my mother, who worked for her father, Joseph LaRocca. Her name was Benedetta and later changed to Beulah Lucille. He met her there at the grocery store where she was keeping the books for her father. He met and fell in love with her going back and forth to Houston to get the groceries.

My grandfather was married; I'm not sure about the circumstances on that but it goes back to the 1870s. That was a day or two before my existence! [both laugh]

WARE: Yes, it was! Okay, is it true that Court Hardware is one of the oldest family-owned businesses in the county?

COURT: We started Court Hardware in 1919. From 1919 to 1945 the store was called a General Mercantile Store, selling groceries, dry goods, hardware, etc. It was reorganized to a hardware store in 1945. I think it would be the oldest Fort Bend County, family-owned and operated business in existence. My son is now the owner. My wife and I are selling to him right now.

We actually started with the name 'Court Hardware' in 1945. Before that it was Court Bros. They lost their store twice to fire. During hard times, and there were a LOT of them, dad drove a bus for the school and also had cattle and was a merchant at the same time.

WARE: He did that to make ends meet?

COURT: Yes, we were a family of five. We lost our oldest sister when she was fourteen. In 1929 he built the home that we lived in. It's where we grew up. It's no longer there. The Stafford underpass that connects Stafford Road and Staffordshire goes right underneath where the house was.

WARE: When did they tear the house down? What year?

COURT: I can't give you any year on that. The city bought that property. My father left it to my youngest sister and she kept it for a number of years. It was thought at one time that they would try to make a building where the historical society would meet, but that didn't pan out.

WARE: Growing up, did you work at the store?

COURT: I started working in the store in 1948. I retired June 29, 2009. Sixty-one years.

WARE: Did you give yourself an award for sixty-one years of service? (laughs)

COURT: No, I just left quietly. I didn't make any fanfare. On the 29th day of June, the 30th day of June was my normal day off, I walked up to my son and I told him, "Chris, I'm going home and I'm not coming back. That's your two-week notice."

I said, "I'm tired and I want to go home." And I did! I don't regret it. I still go down and stick my head in the door and check in with a lot of old friends, and old customers, and so forth and so on. Occasionally I will go down and work an hour or two for a specific need or something like that. Somebody is sick or absent or something like that. I still know how to do it! (laughs)

WARE: (laughing) Well, you had sixty-one years to learn how!

COURT: Yes, ma'am, I did.

WARE: At which other locations did you work?

COURT: Well, we had a location at 109 Avenue F in Stafford, which was referred to as The Stafford Shopping Center. My father and them built that building in 1953. They borrowed money from the Goobles in the Richmond-Rosenberg area. They were well-off people. The engineer of that building was S. A. Russell from Rosenberg. They built a very nice, strong building in Stafford, probably one of the strongest ones still in Stafford as far as quality-built. That was after the fire in 1953.

We lost a building in February 1953 and we immediately started back by temporarily converting an old vacant building called the Wagon Wheel. It was an old restaurant-bar-café that had been closed up and my father had it moved over on the parking lot. We had a company in Houston called Peden Iron and Steel Company that was very fond of my father. He had some real good friends at that place and they actually put him back in business. They gave him the opportunity to get back in business by virtue of the fact they let him buy anything he wanted to put in the store. They gave him twelve months with no payment and no interest. And then financed it at the end of twelve months at a very low rate of interest. All he had to do was pay for the things he bought from week to week. And that's what put us back in business.

I was at the University of Houston and I dropped out of school to help him get back on his feet. I was living at home. That was what you did. That's family, you know, we all pulled together and it paid off.

WARE: At what point did your father retire?

COURT: I went into the Army in September 1956 and when I got back in June 1958, I wanted to go back to school to be a CPA. That's what I was studying when the building burned down and I went back to work for him. Then I was going back to the University of Houston. He talked me into staying with him for a year and said if I liked what I was doing, that he'd give me a third of the store and my brother a third of the store.

So I stayed there and then kind of started enjoying what I was doing and got kind of wrapped up in it and come 1959, well he decided to give us one-third of the business. In 1960 he sold us his third. And so my brother, J. C. and I owned it together for forty-one years. My brother retired on March 31, 2000. He said he didn't want to work on April Fool's Day. (chuckles)

WARE: (laughs) So he beat you to the jump, didn't he! By eight years.

COURT: I bought it from him and he financed it for me and I paid him. My wife and I gifted my son, Chris, half of the business. He had been there ten years and was going to stay and run it. We decided if he was going to do that, then we'd give him half of it and down the road, when I got ready to retire, we'd sell him the other half. And that's what we are in the process of doing.

WARE: How many children do you have?

COURT: We have four children, ten grandchildren and one on the way. I have two boys; the first two children were boys. The girls have four for the oldest girl and three for the youngest girl and she's expecting her fourth. The oldest son has two daughters and the youngest son, Chris, has one daughter.

WARE: Did any of your other children work at the store?

COURT: All of my children worked at the store. In fact, my oldest daughter, Jennifer, worked at the store and I raised her right. She worked in the hardware store and she married a guy named Hammer!

I think that I did a good job there! (chuckles). But he is a soldier, served in Iraq. He's a Lieutenant Colonel and a Battalion Commander in Fort Hood, Texas. Just moved back from Germany after six years, in Iraq and Germany. They are now living in Harker Heights. My youngest daughter lives in Tennessee, with her husband. He's in the real estate trust business and she's a lawyer raising a family and home schooling her children. She decided not to further her career, she'd rather raise a family. And that's what she did.

WARE: And your oldest son?



COURT: My oldest son graduated from Trinity University in San Antonio and has a master's degree from University of Houston Clear Lake. He completed a doctorate degree at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Never did finish his thesis so he doesn't have the shingle. He is a house mom.

His wife is a very lovely lady named Debbie who works for United Health Care, with suicide patients and things of this nature. She works on the mind.

WARE: Are they local? Do they live in Stafford?

COURT: No, they live in Pearland.

WARE: So Chris is the only child that lives in Stafford.

COURT: Yes, that's correct. He married a young lady from the Philippines, Caroline, and they have a daughter named Samantha. Samantha's about a year and four months, or something like that.

WARE: Was the hardware business the only business that you were in?

COURT: No, it wasn't. (chuckles) There was a guy named A. P. and we referred to him as Tony Court, who rented a space from us on our property and put a liquor store up. A number of years later, Tony had a stroke and was unable to run his business anymore, so we bought the business from him. Our hardware business was basically supporting three families, although my brother and I weren't married at the time. It was a pretty good strain on the hardware business, so we decided to buy this business and we kept it for probably twenty years. Then we decided that wasn't what we wanted and we decided to expand the hardware business and take that in. It was in our building. So in 1968 I built the building that we're in now. I made room for a liquor store.

WARE: Any other businesses?

COURT: Well, my wife would fuss at me if I told you about the last business I got into, but I am selling a lotion for arthritis. It absolutely works and the name of it is Two Old Goats, believe it or not.

I have 150 accounts in eight states, one of the states being Hawaii. I have them in Arkansas, Alabama, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. I just got into it because I liked the product and for something to do. It has turned out to be a big business. I opened 106 accounts the first year. I've opened 44 more this year, already.

WARE: Good!

COURT: It's a fun thing. I need something to do. I cannot sit around. I'm not a couch potato. I do my own landscaping and I do my own yard, and I do things like that, and I like doing it. I like getting dirty.

WARE: I gardened today! Are you active in any civic groups?

COURT: Well, I was president of the Water Board for six years. A gentleman by the name of Tony Jebbia was the mayor of Stafford. He resigned from being mayor, and Leonard Scarcella, decided that he was going to run for mayor. Mayor Scarcella was president of the Water Board and I was the youngest member on the Water Board, in age and longevity.

When he left, we had a special election among the directors, and they elected me to be the president. I didn't know why (laughs) but I took the presidency of the Water Board for six years, and then at the end of six years, I thought I had enough of politics, and I decided to get out. I haven't dabbled in politics any more, other than support who I feel is the best candidate for the job. I don't care who he is, the best candidate for the job. He's not my friend or he could be my friend, but he's got to be the best one for the job.

WARE: What kind of issues did you come up against on the Water Board?

COURT: Oh, most of the issues involved people. We were in the early stages of expansion. We were small and, of course, as you can see Stafford has grown in the last forty years. We didn't have water in lots of places. We had people that were three-quarters of a mile from water and sewer lines. They'd want us to run a water line to their house. Well, that wasn't feasible. What they didn't understand is that they wouldn't use enough water to keep the line fresh, or clean. One of the things that I take great pride in is this little area of Stafford, which is referred to as 'Missouri City Estates', which is located in Fort Bend and Harris County. They did not have water except on one street. There were people who built houses on the other streets.

What they would do is, they would run a small line over to the main line, on their own, paid for it themselves. They got water that they had to have a septic tank to use. I approached the Water Board about putting water and sewer lines in there. The Water Board challenged me, saying that if I could get half of the people in that subdivision to put up half of the money, that they would put the other half up. New people would have to pay as they came aboard.

I worked on that diligently and when my time was up to present it to the Board, I was probably fifteen hundred dollars short, based on about \$40,000. And the Board gave me the permission to have water and sewer lines put in there. I said, "If we do that, then you're going to get more development and you're going to get more taxes because people are waiting to build houses in there but they don't have any water and sewer. So we did that. It's been pretty close to thirty years now.

WARE: Where is that area located?

COURT: It's right on Stafford Road and Mula Road. It's the north corner of that particular area. I was a Board of Director on the Chamber of Commerce. I've done various things for Holy Family Catholic Church. I was born in Stafford and baptized in that church, seventy-five years ago.

That's kind of the longevity there. I like long things. I've been in my home about forty-five years. I just like buying something and staying with it. I don't like jumping around and trying to do different things.

WARE: That's a good thing to do. What years were you on the Chamber?

COURT: Oh, ma'am! You're taxing my memory there. I would say probably the first five or six years of the Chamber. During that time, John Null was one of the gentlemen on the Board. I can't remember all of them. I served as a director for Texas Commerce Bank for about seven or eight years and I resigned from there.

WARE: That's okay. Why did you leave the Chamber of Commerce?

COURT: I think that we had term limits. I stayed out my term and then you want new blood with new ideas, and so forth.

WARE: Okay. Now we're really going to tax your brain. Describe how Stafford was different than other towns and cities.

COURT: Well, Stafford is a community of lots of ethnic backgrounds. One of the things that I like about Stafford is the fact that people here want to stay. They like being here. Yes, we had to have some controversy about the school and the quality of education and other things but I think that's turned around.

You can pick up the phone and call the Mayor if you want to. And the Mayor will respond to you. He's been there forty years. I don't agree with everything that the Mayor has come to the table with, but on the other hand, he's been great for this city. He had an overall picture of the city, of the forty years he's been there, you've got to give him an A plus.

Once there was something controversial, I don't remember exactly the thing, and I called him on the phone and I told him, "Mayor," (and I refer to him as Mayor, not Leonard. He's a second cousin) "when we elected you Mayor of this city, we did NOT give you the keys, and did NOT give you the city. We elected you to run the city but we didn't give it to you. It's NOT yours. So you have to understand that you're going to have some opposition from time to time."

Another little story about the Mayor. We were sitting in an FFA banquet affair or something, over by the school. He was sitting on one side of the table and I was on the other and I said, "Mayor, one thing we need to put on the next election is term limits." I want you to know that his face changed different colors.

But I had had a note written and I slid it across the table and I handed it to him, and it said, "I don't think the Mayor should have over twenty-five terms," which gives him fifty years, and he's forty now! (laughs). He folded it up neatly and put it in his briefcase. To this day, I think he still carries it. (laughing) He's never had an opponent that challenged him. I mean there are people that have run against him, but there's nobody that ever even come CLOSE to beating him. I don't know that there could be anybody IN this town that would be willing to try.

You can't argue with a zero property tax and you can't argue with the ten or twelve million dollars they've got in the bank, and you can't argue with the fact that the City of Stafford is debt-free. The building we're sitting in right now [Stafford Center] is twenty-five to twenty-eight million dollars and it is being paid for by the Economic Development Committee. The City of Stafford doesn't own it. You can't argue with a lot of those things.

WARE: No, you cannot. How has Stafford changed in your lifetime?

COURT: (laughing) Well, let me see, when I was in pre-school, you know, I would go down in front of my dad's hardware store and sell peanuts my mother parched for me the night before. She'd parch them on Friday night and I'd sit in front of the hardware store and sell 'em Saturday morning. So I became a salesman before I was six years old!

But, the highways, the freeway, the Stafford Center, there's just multiple changes have come about. I was here before South Main was here. We only had one highway going through Stafford, which was Highway 90 and now is called North Main. Now, we have two highways going through, town, North and South Main. The quality of life is much easier. We're very accessible to Houston and we have all the goodies of Houston and don't have all the headaches of a big city.

Stafford is a nice community to live in. Sure, we don't have the prettiest place. I've been working on that. But, when you start with an old city that had hodge-podge construction and building, many, many years ago before you had zoning and building permits, well you wind-up with some problems.

Compare that to First Colony in Sugar Land, which was all virgin property. They set the rules before anybody could build a building. So naturally, Town Center is a wonderful, gorgeous-looking place. But on the other hand, like I said, you can't go in and bulldoze down peoples' lives and say we're going to start off with a new city.

No, you can't do that. You've got to work with the people who are there. And I think the city fathers of THIS community have done an extremely good job of working with the people and encouraging the people. We're seeing a lot of changes now that are improving it. The 90 corridor and the 1092 corridor are being landscaped with several millions dollars worth of improvements, and I think you can see that people are going to recognize Stafford as a different look. The buildings, a lot of them have modern fronts put on them. They are a whole lot better than they were before.

You know, that's probably the best that we can do. We've got to follow the city's rules. Sometimes that's a little bit difficult but on the other hand, they'll work with you. They are reasonable people. You can walk up and talk to any councilman that you need to talk to, or call him and get him on the phone. Or go see him, he'll give you his time. Same thing with the fire chief, same thing with the police chief or any of the police officers.

WARE: I'm going to back up a little. I didn't really ask you a lot about that fire in 1953. What do you remember about that fire?

COURT: Well, the fire came in the middle of the night. It came somewhere close to midnight, in 1953. It was determined that it was an electrical fire. It was a wet, rainy February night. We lived in a big home which is now located on Present Street, right across from the funeral home over there. It was actually on what is South Main now. Of course, there wasn't any highway there. There was dirt, ready to build a highway.

The right-of-way was there and all, and we rode horses on it, and things like that. A trucker came and banged on the window at our house and told us that the building was on fire. Well, every fire department in Fort Bend County, including Needville, came to assist in the fire. The building was seventy feet deep and about one hundred and sixty-five feet wide, so it was quite a building. It housed the drug store, a post office, a grocery store and our hardware store and there was no water district. There was no public water service, therefore, the only water we had was a pond that was on our property. It was located about 150 feet from our house.

Johnny Davis, who was the county commissioner at the time, lived in Stafford. He hollowed out a piece of ground there and they filled it with tap water from a well. We kept water in reserve just in case we had a fire. They dropped a siphon-type apparatus in there to siphon the water out of the pond. We kept fish in it just to help keep it clean. They used all that water up and all the trucks could carry was 500 or 700 gallons of water. All they could do was keep other things from burning. The building was gone before they could save it. They were just protecting other buildings. They did a good job of it!

WARE: What was that building built out of? Was it brick?

COURT: Well, it was masonry, for the most part. There was a barbershop in that building, along with the other four businesses. The barbershop was kind of an add-on, T. J. Lampson was the guy who operated it. Across the street was Cangelosi's Grocery Store. They were putting water on the grocery store and also the Cash Building, which is still there now, it is an historical building. It was about 14 feet from our building! They kept pouring water on it to keep that from burning. We didn't lose anything except our building.

WARE: Which is amazing, because all those buildings are so close.

COURT: Yes, the one across the street was probably 50 feet from there to the west. To the east it was only about 14 to 15 feet and they had damage to their roofs. They have tar on them, and the heat melted the tar but they didn't structurally damage the buildings.

WARE: That was the only fire in your lifetime, correct?

COURT: That was the only fire in my lifetime, yes. The other one was in 1929. I was born in 1934.

WARE: What's your birth date?

COURT: June the 23rd, 1934.

WARE: What is your favorite memory of growing up in Stafford?

COURT: One of the things I'll always cherish is the fact that I have been parade marshal for the city of Stafford in its 4th of July parade. I was also awarded a proclamation by the city and the mayor, for owning a business in Stafford for 50 years. Like I said, I think that being a businessman in the city of Stafford is what gave me the kind of life that I've got. I always think of myself as a positive person. I don't like to think negative. Negative thoughts tear you up. If something happens that's bad, then you have to understand that there's a reason for it and you have to deal with it. Get it behind you. I don't think that you can dwell on a negative or a bad thing and get a positive out of it. I think you have to say there's a reason for it happening. I don't know the reason but I'll trust in God that he does.

WARE: When you were growing up, what did people do for recreation?

COURT: (laughing) Well, we played baseball and we played hide-and-go-seek. Of course, in those days, nobody locked their houses. You knew everybody in town. I was a gambler. I bet on the baseball games with a black gentleman named Benny Sherman. Benny and I were the best of friends. If you're old enough, you will know who Uncle Remus is. Benny was my Uncle Remus. We bet on the Houston Buffs and whoever they played. He had the out of town team and I took the Buffs. We bet a quarter on EVERY game. We paid off on Monday. He would come to the store every morning when I was working there and when he would lose, he would come in like he had tears in his eyes. When he would win, he'd come in with his hand out and just laugh and probably at the end of a year, we didn't lose a dollar, a dollar and a half. It was just, you hold the money today and I'll hold the money tomorrow.

Like I said, we had different kinds of sports. We played in high school and so forth. I played high school basketball. I didn't play football. I was a very small man, under a hundred pounds when I got to high school, so I didn't challenge those big guys on the football field (laughing). I guess I'm glad I didn't because I see all the knee injuries today that all the football players have had and I still have my two good knees!

WARE: You went to school in Missouri City then, right?

COURT: I graduated from Missouri City High School in 1952. When I started, they had eleven grades the first year I was there. The next year they put in twelve, and they moved me from the first grade to the third grade. I graduated from High school when I was 17 years old.

WARE: What kind of education did you get? Good, bad, okay?

COURT: Well, let me put it this way, the education was offered. I was a little bit on the lazy side, I guess. I made up my mind what I wanted to do. I wanted to know more about math and I didn't care about history. I didn't care that Columbus discovered America in 1492. I just didn't understand why it made any difference. I mean, as a child. But I understood that two times four has to be eight, and it's going to be eight all the time. You're going to have to know that when you start dealing in the retail side of the world. I was exposed to retail when I was a freshman in high school. So, basically, I needed to know numbers and I wanted to know numbers. I was very good at math.

In fact, that's why I decided I wanted to be a CPA. Thank God that I never did become a CPA because today, for the last ten years, my eyes could not handle that. The Lord put me in a job that I could handle, and told me, I guess, in a way that you don't need to be a CPA. You need to be a family-owned and operated business. I have thoroughly enjoyed it.

WARE: It was what you were made to do?

COURT: I've raised four kids. Put them all through private college and none of them got out with a college loan. They were all paid for by the hardware store. And I just thank God for giving me the health and the attitude, the positive attitude, one-foot forward and just keep on going. Don't look back, just keep trudging forward and do the things you've got to do.

WARE: What do you remember about racial segregation in Stafford?

COURT: Well, some of the black people were my best friends. Sure, I remember we had a café in Stafford named Haas Café and the black people would have to go around to the back door. They could get a sandwich or something there. They couldn't come inside the restaurant. Mr. Herbert Haas owned that. He was a very good chef, very good man, I enjoyed him and his wife. She had an unusual name I can't remember. But they were a good team. He had a nice little restaurant. It was on the corner of 1092 and South Main. Actually it was on North Main as well because that corner was very small. The underpass is there now.

Being in the retail business, we dealt with black people and Hispanics and Anglos. Mostly the Anglos were Italians. When my dad came here, the majority of the people were either Italian or black. A few Hispanic people were here and then they filtered in. Anyhow, like I said, some of our best friends were black. We didn't treat them any different, I don't think. Being in the retail business, we wanted business from them. In the back of my mind I would think that I didn't like seeing a black person and an Anglo dating and that didn't happen in my time. I don't think that we had what you would call a real racial problem in Stafford. The blacks did the labor and they were hired by the whites in most cases. Some of them owned their own land and farmed their own land. I mean, there wasn't anybody that tried to kill anybody or fight anybody or put anybody down, to my knowledge.

My father was (deep sigh) a great man (very emotional). I think everybody can say that about his or her father. But, to kind of give you an idea of some of the things that he did, he was the only one that had the type of blood a lady who, from what I understand, needed blood very badly.

In those days, they transfused the blood directly from him to her, no processing. He did that for her. She did well, lived a long life and a number of years later she came around. She came up to me one day, she said, "You know, we're blood kin." That's the kind of thing he did. We had prizes in the store, and we had the first television set, I think, in Stafford. It was an 8-inch RCA set. The screen was an 8-inch diagonal. The front box that you looked at was probably 18 inches high and probably 24 inches wide. Imagine this little 8 inch screen inside of it!

Anyhow, this TV set was not in our home, it was in the hardware store because he would take orders for them and sell them. That's what he was trying to do with them. On Friday nights, Houston was big on wrestling. He would move the TV set up to the window, turn the volume up real loud, and the people would come with their lawn chairs or apple boxes. Apples don't come in boxes any more. They would bring whatever they wanted and sit in front of the store, outside, not in the store, but outside, underneath the canopy and watch the wrestling matches. At 10:00 at night, about ten minutes of news, or fifteen minutes of news, and then the snow would come on the TV set. When the snow would come on at about 10:15 at night, my dad would walk to the hardware store, we lived about two blocks from the hardware store, open the door, go turn the TV set off and come back home. That was his Friday night thing. Now if we were out on Friday nights, the TV set was still on for those people, for their Friday night entertainment.

WARE: What kind of people came to the store.

COURT: A mix of everybody, primarily it was blacks and Anglos because it was in Stafford. Some Hispanics too. Anybody who wanted to come, they were invited. Nobody sold peanuts, no nothing. You brought your own thing. You did your own thing and that's kind of the way he did things.

WARE: You were too old to sell peanuts at that point, right? (laughs)

COURT: (laughing) No I didn't sell peanuts. I was too old for that, at that time. It was something that he wanted to do, and he did. That's just the way he was. My father was referred to, not as C. V. Court, everybody, Hispanics, black, Anglos, strangers, friends, all called him Papa Court. He loved to cook. He loved to barbecue. He loved to feed other people. When he barbecued, we would go out to our bay home, we have one in San Leon, and we'd be out there. I can remember him in high school days. I graduated in 1952.

In those days we'd be having the family thing down on July 4th and he's barbecuing and we're all looking for him about the time to say grace for the blessing for dinner, and nobody could find Papa Court. Well, he had his barbecue plates and he was walking over to the marina and going down and feeding all those guys that worked over at the bait shop. He would bring them all dinner. (both laughing)

But that was just the kind of guy he was. He loved to fish. He was just the kind of father that you want. I've always tried to walk in his footsteps, I guess you'd say. I've always wanted to try to be kind, helpful and I've always been nostalgic about things. I get choked up a little bit because I truly believe it.

WARE: Yes. Can I ask you, the woman that he gave the transfusion to, what was her name? Did she live in Stafford?

COURT: It seems like to me, if I remember right, her daughter's name was Elaine Altimore. Her last name was Altimore, but I don't remember what her name was. The daughter, I knew the daughter. She was my age. She was like a relative of the Cangelosis or the Triolas or something. The old Italian families.

WARE: Right. That's nice. In that same vein, where did the people in Stafford go for medical care?

COURT: Well, we had a doctor in Sugar Land. His name was Dr. Slaughter. (chuckles) A hell of a name for a doctor! Dr. Slaughter was the doctor and my mother was a patient of his and, of course, I was. We went to Dr. Wheeler for dentistry.

There was a medical center in Sugar Land just to the right of Highway 90. There was a railroad track going through there and it was pretty close to where Imperial Sugar is now. There was a clinic. I can remember my mother would go there. He called everybody 'mama' and you know he would pat them on the back and say, "Mama, come back and see me in the next week." We would go to the doctor with mom. We were small children and mom would have to leave us in the clinic, sometimes sitting with older brother or sister. Because, you know, we couldn't go anywhere. Then somebody would drive us up there because mom didn't drive. My mom NEVER drove. But they also did their shopping. I can remember going downtown Houston with my mother at Christmastime and going to Foley's. When we would go, she would take us with her to Foley's. We'd find a place and she'd sit us down and say, 'I'm going to be shopping about an hour and I'll be back to check on you.'

We'd sit there. I don't know what we did for an hour (chuckles) but we'd sit right there and we didn't follow her around the store. It was a treat to ride the elevator, going up and down in the elevator and the escalators and stuff like that. Downtown Foley's was on Main at that time, about the 500 or 600 block of Main, if I remember right. By the way, when you asked about entertainment earlier, we had tent shows that came to town.

They would come and stay three or four months at a time. They'd put up a tent and they'd have shows every Friday and Saturday. I don't know whether they did it on Sundays or not. Then we had a skating rink that would come to town every so often. The gentleman who owned the skating rink, his name was Poe. He was from Sugar Land. My aunt provided the property. I don't know whether she got anything for it or not. Probably just got a little something. But it was on the corner of North Main and Avenue E. That's where they put it up. And it would stay up there three or four or five months at a time.

WARE: So, the tent shows were they a circus type of show?

COURT: No, ma'am. It was a movie. Roy Rogers and Dale Evans and all those. Most of it was shoot-em-up westerns. You didn't see any love scenes and that kind of stuff. It was always just cowboys and Indians. (laughing). It was a big screen, but it wasn't like they are today. It was probably twenty feet wide or eighteen feet wide, or something like that. And ten feet tall or something like that.

WARE: Do you know where they brought those tent shows from?

COURT: Well, they traveled around the country, I guess. I'm not sure. There was one man named Joe Schuman that was with the tent show. He fell in love with a young lady here in the area. Her name was Janie Gimbelluca. They married and he stayed here and the tent show went on. He worked around the service stations and stuff like that. He didn't have any education, I don't imagine.

WARE: Do you have any old photos that we could copy?

COURT: My wife has a lot of old photos. She and Sadie Williams wrote the history of the city of Stafford. There are a number of old photos in there.

WARE: Good. What haven't I asked you about today that I should ask you about?

COURT: I think we've pretty well covered a lot. I got my high school education is all I have. I mean a year and a half of college. But I had a job for 50 years and never did have to change! (laughs)

WARE: (chuckling) That's right!

COURT: I made a good living and I'm still enjoying life. I tried to always be involved in the community. Not from a political standpoint so much, but as to being able to be available. I'm on the *ad hoc* committee right now at the city of Stafford. I'm on the finance committee of The Holy Family Catholic Church. I was an auctioneer for The Holy Family for probably twenty years. I did a little auctioneering for Saint Theresa's Church in Sugar Land and I also did some for some Catholic high schools and in Houston. I always volunteer. I wasn't an auctioneer. I learned when I was at Holy Family. They talked about having an auction and one of the guys popped up and said, "Well, Charles talks a lot. He can probably handle that." So I said, "Well, if you'll bear with me, I'll try it". So we did and I had fun doing it.

I didn't do all the chanting that real auctioneers did. I did it a little differently. I was famous for auctioning off an empty box. At the end of every auction at the church, I would auction off an empty box. The people who were there for the first time wouldn't believe. I would tell them that it was empty. I didn't show that it was empty. I would tell them it was empty. When the bid was up to about \$100 for the box, and my comment to the people was, "I know that some of you wanted to donate money to the church and haven't had the opportunity to buy what you wanted to buy. I'm going to give you the opportunity to buy an empty box and make your donation." Then the guy that bid a \$100 or something and that would be all the bids that I would get.

Then I'd open the box, turn it upside down and shake it and let everybody look in it. Then I'd close it back up, and I'd say, "Now who will give me a second bid on this thing?" Sometimes I'd get \$50 or \$60 more. I'd do it about three times and wind up getting about \$200 total for the empty box. Which is just additional money that the church got.

But it was fun, and it was part of what they expected. In fact, if I decided not to do it, they would say, "Aren't you going to auction off the empty box?" It was kind of like Mattress Mack and 'Save You Money'. You get a following (laughing). But it was very competitive in the auctioning because we sold local women's paintings. Wilma Jebbia was married to the mayor, A. J. 'Tony' Jebbia, and they have two sons, Mark and the other Jack. Their mother painted, and then a lady named Rose Cangelosi was a painter.

WARE: She was the grocery store Cangelosi?

COURT: There were two families of Cangelosis, both in the grocery business. One of them was over by Zavala Street in the Houston area and the other was here in Stafford. Then there were three or four more people that did paintings. The farmers would bid on their wives paintings. They would bring \$200-\$300 a piece. The deal was to see which woman could get the most money for her painting. The guys would encourage friends of theirs to keep pushing the bidding up, so that their wife's painting would sell for the most. That went on for about 4 to 5 years and was kind of fun! That was competition, you know. Competition breeds success, you know. I enjoyed it. I was the first altar boy in the church that is now in Stafford. But, you know, that church has since moved to Missouri City. I served as altar boy probably 'til I was 21 years old!

WARE: What was that church?

COURT: The Holy Family Catholic Church. It's still Holy Family. It won't change the name. The church started in Missouri City many, many years ago. I don't know what year it was started. My wife would know that. She wrote the history of the Holy Family Catholic Church, too. That's an interesting book. You might want to look into that for some history of Stafford and Missouri City. The church was moved to Stafford because my aunt, Katie Cangelosi, whose husband was F. G. Cangelosi, bought the land. They came from Bryan and bought the land. She was a widow and she had a lot of property, a lot of rent houses.

I can remember one of the guys who barbecued for my dad all the time, his name was Balem Newman. He rented a house from my aunt for \$8 a month. It was on 1092/Murphy Road. He barbecued for my dad when my dad had barbecue occasions associated with the business. He would invite friends of his out to barbecues and kind of brown-nose them if you want to call it that. The people he was buying from so he could get some good deals. And he did! (laughs)

WARE: (laughs) Right!

COURT: He'd bring out doctors, their lawyers and all that kind of people, and they'd have barbecues. He'd furnish entertainment. Katie donated the land to build the church on in Stafford. Then she also donated the land for the expansion of the church. Its on North Main around Avenue D, I believe. She donated all that land and they decided to build the new church there. I'm seventy-five years old now. I've thoroughly enjoyed my life. I've enjoyed my family. I enjoy people. I enjoy being a part of something. I don't like long-term commitments to politics or committees. I'll serve on a temporary committee but I don't want a three or four year commitment to anything. I want to be free to do and fly where I want to fly.

I love my wife and my family. I have a great family. They all love one another; they all share a lot of their lives. They are truly great kids that have no problems, to my knowledge, whatsoever. They are raising great children. My entire family is Catholic. My son-in-law in Tennessee is a convert that would like to be the Pope.

My daughter-in-law is a convert married to my oldest son. She is a wonderful lady and has a wonderful family. I have nothing against Protestants. It's just that it's a good relationship when the whole family believe and think alike.

My grandfather and my grandmother died thirty-six hours apart. The wife died first. She went to the hospital. Grandpa told her when she left to go to the hospital that she would never come back home. While they were burying my grandmother, they came back home and found my grandfather dead in bed. Within thirty-six hours of the time that she died, he died.

Another little story that I would like to tell you that touches me in such a way. It's my mom. Christmas of her seventy-eighth year she told us she was for all practical purposes blind. She had cataracts so bad she could only see images. She would pray the rosary, as a Catholic does, every day, at the window.

She sat next to a sliding glass patio door and prayed her rosary. She said to us at Christmas dinner, "I have something I need to tell you all. Last week, while I was praying the rosary, the Blessed Mother came to the window, and said I will come and get you before your seventy-ninth birthday." We buried her on her seventy-ninth birthday.

She was in the hospital about ten days before. Each day she would ask us, "What's today?" Our response was, "Tuesday", or "Wednesday", or "Thursday", or whichever day. She'd say, "No, what's the date?" My mother had faith! She could not have lived past her seventy-ninth birthday. (audibly shaken) That is probably the most touching story that I have. I will always remember it. That she was a person of faith, a wonderful mother, a wonderful cook, and in those days, they were all stay-at-home moms. Which it should be today.

Interview Ends