

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Frank Barrett Davis, 2012**

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Transcript

TERRELL: Let's start with a little biographical information. If you would give me your full name and date of birth and where you were born.

DAVIS: Frank Barrett Davis and my date of birth was July 12, 1928, in Richmond, Texas.

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

DAVIS: At home, between Richmond and Rosenberg, on the Brazos River.

TERRELL: By a midwife?

DAVIS: I don't know whether Mother had a midwife or not.

TERRELL: What brought your family to the Fort Bend County area?

DAVIS: Well, one of my ancestors, Anton Wessendorff, came in on a boat. In 1853, he left Germany to avoid the draft, I'm told, and came over here with two brothers. He brought his tool chest because he was a cabinetmaker and a coffin maker. He landed in either Galveston, I believe, and came up here and settled.

TERRELL: What did he do when he got here?

DAVIS: Cabinet maker and coffin maker. Tonie Wessendorff, who was my grandfather, was the first mayor of Richmond. But I believe Anton started making cabinets and coffins. Whether or not he acquired the Wessendorff lumber company at that time, I don't know. It came in to the family soon after, and then the undertaking parlor. So that's the way he busied himself.

TERRELL: Where did he meet his wife?

DAVIS: I don't know where he met her, but she came over soon after him, and settled up near Bellville, I'm told. Johanna, I think, was her name. Virginia, my sister, would know better about that. She was from a place in Germany, very close to where he was, but whether they knew each other before they came over, I don't know. He came over, she came over, they got together somehow. That's all I know. (chuckles)

TERRELL: What type of work did she do? Was she in the house on a farm?

DAVIS: I'm sure she was on a farm in those days. And probably women didn't work outside the home much in those days. I never have asked what she did.

TERRELL: Do you know how many children they had?

DAVIS: Nine or ten is my best recollection. Tonie, my grandfather, was one of them, but I don't know where he stood in that group. They had Aunt Annie, and Bob, and Ed, and Joe. I don't know all the brothers. I don't know how many of them died in infancy, but I believe Anton and Johanna had nine or ten children.

TERRELL: What part of Richmond, what area did you grow up in? And did you grow up in the same house or did you move?

DAVIS: I grew up in the same house. It was the house that Mr. Tonie, my grandfather, built for my mother on a farm between Richmond and Rosenberg, on the Brazos River. And I stayed there until I was age sixteen, and then I went off to college.

TERRELL: How many acres in the farm?

DAVIS: About 160.

TERRELL: Did you farm it?

DAVIS: We did. We had a dairy farm for a lot of the time, when I was growing up. We milked Holstein cattle, some Jerseys and some mixed. Then we went to beef cattle, Herefords, and we also did a little rice farming. But primarily, in my years, it was dairy farming.

TERRELL: Did you milk the cows?

DAVIS: I didn't have to do much milking. But we DID milk, by hand some and then we had machines by the time I got old enough to participate in it. And, of course, I had the responsibility of feeding the calves and feeding the hogs, and feeding the chickens, and getting the eggs. I had a lot of collateral duties but I didn't do much milking!

TERRELL: Sounds like you were busy! How many siblings did you have?

DAVIS: I had five. Two older sisters, Antoinette was the oldest, and she was named after Mr.6Tonie. She was later called Bush. And then Virginia, who is here today, was second. My brother Syd was the oldest boy. Tonie, named after his grandfather, was the next child. Then me. And Tommy was my younger brother. He was named after one of the Wessendorff brothers, Tom Wessendorff.

TERRELL: What families lived close to you? Did you have close neighbors?

DAVIS: Well, we had 180-something acres, but on the west side, we had the Brenners; I can remember Pete and Victor Brenner, and then one or two girls. They spoke German and they read German newspapers up until the time I left home. They were farmers like we were. Over on the east side, we had Stadde Vasek. He was a carpenter and he had three or four children. There was Tom and Jim and I don't remember the other's name but then there was Millie and Betty, and Betty was sort of a contemporary of mine, too. She went to school with me.

TERRELL: Where did you go to school?

DAVIS: Richmond Elementary and then Richmond High School, which hadn't yet become Lamar Consolidated. When I got out, in 1945, it was still Richmond High. It became Lamar Consolidated two or three years later.

TERRELL: How did you get to school?

DAVIS: I was driven to school, or maybe in my last year or two of high school, I would get to take the truck. But probably I was just dropped off every morning. In those days there may have been two cars outside of the high school (chuckles).

TERRELL: Where did your family shop?

DAVIS: They shopped in Richmond, on the primary street, Morton Street. We had four grocery stores, a drug store, a doctor's office, and a dentist's office. It was a BUSY place on Saturdays because everybody would come in from Needville, Pleak, Fulshear, Katy, you name it, they came to Richmond on Saturday, and the place was alive!

TERRELL: Did you know any families or have friends from outlying towns like Pleak and Needville and Fulshear?

DAVIS: I did, indeed. When I got to high school, they were my classmates. We had about seventy in my graduating class and only a FEW of us were from Richmond proper. Some of the best members of our football team were from Needville! Some people lived up near Katy, but whether they lived IN Katy or not, I don't know. Fulshear had people coming in, Beasley had people coming in, so I knew kids from all of those areas.

TERRELL: But did you ever get to see them, other than at school? I guess football games.

DAVIS: Football games, because I played football. And some of them played football. I did that for three years. I played in the band my freshman year in high school. But I'd go spend the night with some of them. I remember spending the night with Bernard Roester, down near Pleak, at his house. I'm sure I stayed with other people, from around those areas. They all lived on farms like I did.

TERRELL: What did your family do for entertainment?

DAVIS: Go to the movies, I would say was about the only entertainment, and going to the Houston Fat Stock Show and going to Fort Bend County Fair, because that was just half a mile away. And at home, we entertained ourselves. We listened to the radio. We worked crossword puzzles and jigsaw puzzles. And we played ping pong on the dining room table. Those were pretty tough times, Depression times in the early '30s. And the kids, for entertainment, played rubber guns (laughing). And also spun tops and played marbles, and ran races and things. That was our entertainment! Or going down to the river and fiddling around on the sand bar, and hunting and fishing.

TERRELL: Did Richmond have a movie house?

DAVIS: They did. Cole Theater.

TERRELL: There was one in Richmond AND in Rosenberg?

DAVIS: Cole Theater in Richmond and the Cole Theater in Rosenberg and the State Theater in Rosenberg. They had two movie houses. And you changed movies about twice a week. And they'd never run the same movie at any of those three. So usually, I'd go to the movie twice a week.

TERRELL: Where did you go to church?

DAVIS: Saint John's Methodist, all my life. I was baptized over there. There's a photograph of Richard Joseph with my arm around him when I was seven and he was eight or nine. I've seen that photograph many a time! I can't ever remember going to any other church. My mother was VERY active in the church and Dad came right after the collection was taken up. (laughs)

TERRELL: (laughing) Well, tell me about your schooling. Have you kept up with classmates? Do they live in the area? Or teachers?

DAVIS: I kept up with some of them that I knew REAL well, like Dot, Dorothy Booth Myers Harrison. She came in about the 7th grade. She'd gone to Booth for her early grades, but she came in and Dot and I then have been friends ever since 1938 or 1939, when she came in here. Because, again, during the war, they didn't want to drive all the way from Booth into Richmond to go to school, so they rented a little house, right there near the school. And then she and I went to Texas together for college. I've seen her within the last week or two. She's godmother to my son and maybe my daughter. And then, others, like Martha Payton, she's a cousin. Martha and I went to school together, and I kept up with her. Still do, and her husband, Lou, is one of my best friends. And Moselle Edelstein was a great friend. Her dad ran the store there, and her two sisters and her mother. And we'd go over to her house on Sunday nights and listen to Inner Sanctum in her livingroom. But Moselle died a number of years ago. Roy Woodmansee was another GREAT friend. Roy lived catty-cornered from the courthouse and I'd visit him. We'd ride tricycles around the courthouse square. Roy went to Rice and I went to Texas, but we kept up with each other pretty well. He died, probably twenty years ago.

TERRELL: You said that one of them had the store. Which store?

DAVIS: The Edelsteins had a dry goods store. That's where I bought I clothes, suits.

TERRELL: What about teachers? Any teachers that you remember that were really good?

DAVIS: Absolutely. In those days you had a LOT of good ones. And incidentally, many of the teachers lived in the Wessendorff home that my mother grew up in, and that her dad, Tonie Wessendorff, built. It was a beautiful home, it was where the bank was located for some years.

As to teachers, I don't remember my first grade teacher. I remember when I sat down in the chair; I sat in the very back row, because I was a little skeptical about what was going to happen! My second grade teacher was Mrs. Saxon, she was great. My third grade teacher was Myrtle Davis, she was wonderful. No kin. Fourth grade teacher was Mrs. Brooks. She was beautiful and sweet. My fifth grade teacher was Mrs. Bell and Margaret Steed, who later married a prominent citizen here in Richmond. And Mrs. Bright was my English teacher, she taught me Shakespeare. And Mrs. Christian taught me typing. I had wonderful teachers. That's why I decided to become a teacher and a coach. But I was going broke and living at home, so I decided I'd better be a lawyer.

TERRELL: Can you tell me a typical day in your childhood?

DAVIS: A typical day on a farm would be to get up pretty early, because dairy farmers do. And before I went to school, there wasn't a whole lot of activity and we didn't go to school until we were six years old. There was hunting, fishing, looking after the chickens and the hogs, working in the garden whatever was required. We had a HUGE garden and we grew everything we needed. After I started school, the typical day would be to get up at six o'clock, go down and feed the calves, feed the hogs, feed the chickens. Then I'd drive in and pick up our help. We had two black ladies that worked on the farm with us, as cooks. And deliver milk, because we bottled the milk and left it at a lot of homes. And I'd have to run up and leave the milk on the porch. Get back home and get ready and come in to school at eight o'clock. And then go to school all day. When I got through, if I wasn't playing sports, I was playing in the band and somebody'd come pick me up or I'd walk home. It was only a mile or so. People didn't think it was tough to walk a mile or so in those days! It was good exercise. But I had a bicycle after I got to be eight or nine. I paid \$5.00 for it from Ansel's Western Auto Store.

TERRELL: What was your most vivid memory about growing up in Richmond?

DAVIS: How pleasant it was and how it was nice to know everybody. And you'd see everybody you knew at the post office or the grocery store. Some of my best friends were Sam Reinke who ran one grocery store. My uncle, Claude Davis, was postmaster. Just the friendly atmosphere. I'd love to go over and sit on the front porch with Uncle Ed Wessendorff and watch people walk by. And sit at Aunt Hattie's and do the same thing. She was married to Tom Wessendorff, but he died in about '29 or '30. Just everywhere you went were friendly people. And we didn't go much outside of Richmond. Except we'd go to Houston every now and then, and meet at Levy's store on the corner and park, and come back and meet there to ride back home.

TERRELL: You drove, then?

DAVIS: Well, I can't remember doing the driving. I think Mom did most of the driving. Dad was pretty well restricted to the dairy farm, because you had to milk cows twice a day. Except to go fishing. Later we had a couple of ponds on the place so he fished there. That was one thing my dad, Syd Davis, would do. Anybody could come by and if Dad was out on the tractor, mowing or plowing or doing something, and they said, 'Hey, let's go fishing, Syd' he'd say, 'All right!' And he'd just stop the tractor. He had a rod and reel handy and they'd take off for Booth Lake, which had a real nice lake at that time. Or they'd go to Freeport or Port Aransas. Or wherever anybody wanted to go fishing. He was ready to go!

TERRELL: What did you grow in your garden?

DAVIS: Tomatoes, okra, peas, carrots--a LOT of carrots. I remember gathering up a WHOLE bunch of them and taking them in to Sam Reinke's Grocery Store and they paid us eighteen cents for them. But just about anything that you could think of that would grow here. We had plum trees, too, that weren't in the garden, but they were close by. I remember primarily, tomatoes, okra, corn and peas, and beans.

TERRELL: Did your mom can?

DAVIS: She did. Every year.

TERRELL: And did you butcher your own calves?

DAVIS: Not the calves so much as I remember but we butchered hogs often, and had the sausage and the pork. I don't ever remember butchering a calf, but a LOT of hogs.

TERRELL: What changes in the area do you think have been best? And I also want to know the worst!

DAVIS: I'm sorry, when you get this old, I'm 84, you start wondering if the changes have been for the best! (chuckles) But I think our school system--I taught there for a while and coached football many years ago, before I decided to be a lawyer--I thought our school system was real good then. I hope it still is. Of course the roads have been improved. We didn't have anything but gravel roads and mud roads, so they've been improved. My grandfather, Mr. Tonie Wessendorff, I read an article about him. I guess maybe it was the article when he died, but how he'd been the Mayor and everybody in Richmond thought he could be the best mayor in any place. And it said he made our mud roads better by putting gravel on them. And he built sidewalks. Those were improvements. I guess we have a few more places to eat. We had the Ideal Café and the National Café, and they were pretty good. You could go in and get a hamburger for a dime, and a malt for fifteen cents. And we had a WONDERFUL swimming pool that Aunt Mamie George donated. And I'd spend a whole lot of my day all summer long, going in there at ten o'clock and staying until five in the afternoon. And there'd be fifteen of us that were there every day. Martha Ansel (Payton) would be there with her brother, Bert and Diz and her sister, Carolyn. The swimming pool was the center of attention in the summertime. I can't think of anything we DIDN'T have that you could have made much better.

TERRELL: Was the swimming pool in Richmond?

DAVIS: Yeah, it was right there where the City Hall is now, the old City Hall building. The great big oak trees and the statue of Hilmar are there now. The pool was right behind that. I think they have water storage tanks or something there, now. Right across the street was a blacksmith shop. The cotton gin was on the other side of the railroad tracks. And it was of fun, as a kid, to see forty wagon-loads of cotton being brought in by mule and trailer, waiting to be ginned. And they'd bring it in from everywhere they'd come with their mules and cotton, wagons were from miles away.

TERRELL: But you never grew cotton?

DAVIS: We did grow a little cotton, for a few years, because EVERYBODY in this area grew a little cotton. And I can remember trying to pick it and how difficult that was. And how some people were SO adept at picking cotton. They could pick a half a bale in a day. They'd pick with both hands and go down two rows at a time. My little brother came out one day to pick cotton (laughs). He picked so little that my Daddy brought a Bull Durham tobacco sack out the next day, which is about big enough to hold ten pennies, and he said, 'Here's your sack for today, Tommy. That's about all you're going to need for the amount of cotton you can pick.' (laughing) So we did grow a little cotton, but primarily we were a dairy farm and then a beef cattle farm.

TERRELL: Did you have a job as a kid?

DAVIS: I didn't. The first job I had was when I was in college and I went over to Sugar Land, and just walked in to Nalco and said, 'I need a job.' They said, 'Well, we don't have anything open, but we're going to hire you and find something.' And they did. Made me a carpenter's helper. I was probably 17 years old at that time. By that time we didn't have a whole lot of work to do around the home. Dad was too old. Mom and Dad just lived there but we had given up dairy farming. So there wasn't much for me to do, and that's why I went over to Sugar Land and got a job.

TERRELL: Do you have any old photographs or documents that could be copied that would be nice to have in your file?

DAVIS: I'll certainly look them over. I don't recall any, that aren't already in the book on the history of Richmond. There are two history books I have on Richmond. Photographing wasn't all that popular in those days. I wasn't much of one for photographing anyway, and I never did save any of that stuff.

TERRELL: You mentioned, before we started recording, that Mamie George had a party for you when you graduated from high school. Could you tell us a little about that?

DAVIS: Well, she was a Davis before she married Uncle Albert. I wasn't very good, and still am not very good about family history, Virginia, my sister, could tell you about that. I know she was kin and she DID have a party for me out at the ranch, when I graduated, which would have been in 1945. I'd seen a LOT of Aunt Mamie and Uncle Albert, because Uncle Albert would hire my daddy to come out and cut the corn with his crew of fifteen people. Cut the corn and churn it into silage and put it in trench silos. And I'd drive the truck after I got old enough and have the machine put the corn into that truck to take it to where they could churn it up and make silage out of it. And then, Dot and I were close, and we'd go out there sometimes, Dot Booth Myers, and we'd just visit with Aunt Mamie and Uncle Albert. In those days, people did a lot of visiting. They didn't spend time with television or anything else. We'd go out and sit under those big oak trees and visit, or sit in the dining room and visit.

TERRELL: Was it a large party?

DAVIS: I imagine there were thirty or forty people.

TERRELL: Did you have a favorite toy as a child? Or what was your favorite thing about coming in to town?

DAVIS: A lot of times, if we were not swimming in the summer, when we came into town, we played rubber guns at the lumberyard. I don't know if you know what a rubber gun is, but you make a long handle and then it would have a barrel out of wood, and you'd have a clothespin near the handle. And something where you could secure the rubber at the other end. You'd cut up rubber tires and stretched them on there, and you push down that clothespin and that rubber would fly twenty, or thirty, or forty feet! Man, it was GREAT to hide in those stacks of lumber and play war with rubber guns. (laughing) That and the swimming pool were the two activities in town that I can remember.

TERRELL: Where did you meet your wife?

DAVIS: I met my wife at our apartment. I was with another fellow, a lawyer that I practiced law with for forty years. I'd gone to law school with seven guys from Rice, and one of them kept telling me I ought to meet his good friend Elaine, who also went to Rice. He brought her over one day, and we decided we liked each other.

TERRELL: And do you have children?

DAVIS: Got a son that's nearly fifty, a daughter that's forty-five. I just went out to visit her in Los Angeles. She's a movie star. She's been in some things, like E. R. and Six Feet Under. She had very minor roles but she's made a lot of ads. She was a leading lady in a lot of plays in Houston, so she decided to try Los Angeles. It's a little tougher out there to get a job, but she's beautiful and sings well. The last thing I remember her doing is Private Lives and she was just great in that. She was in Steel Magnolias, in Nine, and you name it. Fifteen plays in Houston at various theaters. Main Street Theater was one of her main ones. She and her friends out there are still trying to get anything they can. And she makes some ads every now and then, and goes to a lot of performances. And makes it back to Houston about every year for a charitable deal where they get her to do something with the Mayor or the head of the Astros or something. They have a celebrity, an actor performance, and they always ask her to come back and do something.

TERRELL: Will you tell me her name?

DAVIS: Doris Elaine Davis. Doris Davis is what she goes by.

TERRELL: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

DAVIS: No ma'am, except it's been a pleasure.

TERRELL: Well, I've enjoyed this interview. It was VERY nice of you to come in and do this.

DAVIS: Happy to do it. 'Preciate it. I love Richmond, so I always brag I'm from Richmond, even though I've lived in Houston for sixty years!

TERRELL: Thank you very much.

Interview ends

Miscellaneous notes submitted by Frank Davis after the interview:

As boys, one of our chores was to bring wood up from outside to the stove in the master bedroom on the second floor. Good exercise. It was so cold on May 22nd, 1926, the day my brother Tonie was born, that we had to have a fire in the wood stove. That stove was primarily for heating, not cooking.

Also, once Dad was sick and kept calling for Mom who was downstairs. He wanted her to help with something. She did not answer. After several "calls" he took some of the logs intended for burning in the stove and threw them down the stairwell. The noise was LOUD. Mom came running to find out if the house was collapsing. Dad, like many males I know, could sometime be IMPATIENT.

Leather. Probably 50% of the boys I went to grade school with did not own or wear a pair of shoes to school. There was no wet leather smell in our classroom, even on a cold winters day.