

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Frank Briscoe Jr.**

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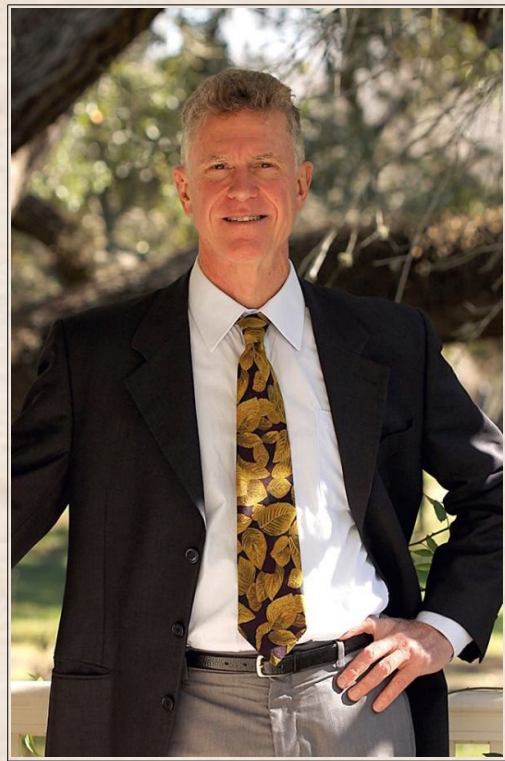
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Transcript

HARGROVE: You are Frank Briscoe, Jr. but people know you as Chip? Tell us when and where were you born?

BRISCOE: I was born in Houston. June of 1957 at Herman Hospital.

HARGROVE: Okay, you were born in the hospital and the doctor, do you know?

BRISCOE: I think the doctor was who delivered me and my three brothers was Doctor Wolters.

HARGROVE: What brought your family to Fort Bend County?

BRISCOE: My family moved to Texas and Fort Bend County in the 1830s, my great, great grandfather Parmenas Briscoe... I not exactly clear how this worked, but gave some funds to a William Andres who brought some property on his behalf and the deed was later transferred. My great great great grandfather Parmenas was the father of Andrew Briscoe, James Briscoe and others. Andrew settled in Harrisburg and married Jane Harris and I am not sure how he and James decided to live where they did. James, I believe, lived in Richmond for a number of years. I believe moved to the location of the league of land that he had purchased in the 1830s. I think he actually move to the property in the late 1840s or early 1850s, but farmed and ranched it in the intervening years approximately 1838 or 1836. He died in 1852 and is buried in our cemetery and I am pretty sure that he had been living on the property before then.

HARGROVE: You have a family cemetery on your land?

BRISCOE: Yes, yes we do.

HARGROVE: Was your grandfather a rancher or a farmer?

BRISCOE: He was a rancher and a farmer. He ran cows with his brother, my great uncle Mason, and probably they had cows that belonged to their siblings in the same herd. My grandfather had an interesting strategy; I guess you could say, about cattle. I heard this from a rancher in West Texas who had been told by uncle Andy, who repeated my grandfathers strategy to him which was: always stock for a drought. I think they probably ran a conservative number of cows, but also I think they probably had cows. It was a very fluid environment depending on the range conditions.

They were pretty up to date I think, and scientific about it, both my great uncle Mason, who was born in 1887 I believe, and my grandfather attended A&M. I am not sure, I think that my grandfather went to Saint Eds and I am pretty sure he did go to A&M for a couple of years. Whether he graduated from there or not, I am not sure. So they studied range management. At one time I even had my great uncle's 1901 Herbarium. It was a wonderful book that he had put together at A&M of dried plant specimens, really something. They were fairly knowledgeable, up to date and scientific about the way that they managed their herds. They were sizable.

As a very young kid I worked cows with them a few times, those were pretty special times. I've never been employed as a ranch hand, but as a young boy, I don't know if I did it really much after I was seven or eight, I would spend the night at the homestead, which we called the Home Place. It is my home now. When they were going to work cows or move them from one pasture or ship cows I participated a few times. For a young kid it was pretty magical. We'd get up before daybreak, my uncle Bill, he was my Dad's twin brother, would have had the horses in the coral, fed them ready to saddle. Load them in trailers and we would go off... on to the pasture where we were gathering the cows. Sometime we would move them down FM(Farm to Market Road) 723. Before FM 723 was paved. I believe that my grandfather provided half of the right of way... the western half of the right of way for FM 723 from FM 359 north to Settegast or Gaston Road.

HARGROVE: What was his name?

BRISCOE: His name was Andrew, my grandfather's name was Andrew Clyde Briscoe.

HARGROVE: Did you have a garden?

BRISCOE: They had a wonderful garden and it is now where I have a garden. It must be close to a quarter of an acre but you can see it.

HARGROVE: Did you plant it with a tractor?

BRISCOE: They did plant it with a tractor and I sometimes use a tractor and sometimes a tiller. They raised most of their own vegetables, almost all of their vegetables when my dad was growing up. They had a couple of farm hands that did most of that. They always had a fig tree or two.

When I started living there in the early 1990s there were pear trees and a couple of figs. I am pretty sure they are Brown Turkey, which is the traditional fig for this area. Now I have about a hundred fig trees. What else did they raise? We always picked berries in the good year for berries.

HARGROVE: How about pecans?

BRISCOE: We have a lot of pecans. I picked up pecans a few years. The main crops that they grew on the farm were cotton and corn. I don't really remember any sorghum, like milo, but I think that they did. I know it was grown around there.

HARGROVE: How much acreage did you think you had in cotton?

BRISCOE: Gosh it would be a total guess but I remember the pastures that were planted in cotton. I think probably... maybe forty or fifty acres or less. Not huge, maybe as much as a hundred acres some years.

HARGROVE: A typical day in your childhood?

BRISCOE: Most of my childhood was spent in Houston. My grandfather gave my dad six acres on FM 723 near Settegast Road and that was our weekend house. That was our weekend place so my mom and I had a garden there and we would come up to Home Place every weekend. Virtually every weekend and visit with my grandparents and see some of my cousins. We came out for special occasions, my dad and his twin's birthday was celebrated at the picnic grounds which is where my cousin Drew Mahler is building a house now, adjacent to the Briscoe Manor if you know where that is on seven twenty-three.



Briscoe Manor

Easter, we had Easter egg hunts at either the Home Place or the picnic grounds. The picnic grounds had a softball diamond so it was a place where we had all kinds of gatherings. It was really... it was just a fun magical time. To hear the stories that my dad told of growing up out there, especially when the four or five of them got together! They really had a lot of fun growing up on that farm. They got into all kinds of mischief, but it was for the most part good clean fun. (laughter)

HARGROVE: What kind of cattle did you raise?

BRISCOE: I have never been in the cattle business, but I know they raised mixed herds. At some time they had some Brahma bulls and they had Herefords. They may have had some Angus mix. I really don't know how they decided that part of it.

HARGROVE: Where they involved in butchering or were they just raising it for an income and they sold it off at auction?

BRISCOE: Mostly they sold it at auction. They shipped them somewhere. I think they did take calves for themselves and I remember going with my uncle Bill once to get a calf, a pretty big fat calf, just grass feed so it wasn't really fat but it was a big healthy calf. He just drove up to it next to it and pulled down his deer rifle and shot it, and it dropped like a stone. He had a trailer on the back of his pickup and with some block and tackle. He loaded it by himself, just loaded it into that trailer and we drove into Richmond. I think it was in Richmond, a slaughterhouse there and they loaded it onto this conveyor. I say a conveyor belt it was just a rail with rolling wheels and were able to roll this thing all the way through the processing area. It started as a calf and then every stage they had gutters, just concrete floors with concrete gutters for the blood. It was one of the bloodiest things I had ever seen in my life. I don't know if they were sharing it with the slaughterhouse, if the slaughterhouse kept half of the beef or what. I really don't remember. They always had two refrigerators and a freezer so I guess that it was cut up into pretty small cuts by the time they picked it up.

HARGROVE: They were doing that for their own purposes, not for sale? But then they had some for sale also right?

BRISCOE: By and large they were shipped; I suppose they did this on a regular basis to provide meat to themselves. And they ate a lot of meat; they ate meat breakfast, lunch and dinner.

HARGROVE: Oh really.

BRISCOE: Then they also took deer to Dozier's for processing, Dozier's in Fulshear. I remember taking a deer or two there.

HARGROVE: And where did you go to school?

BRISCOE: All my education growing up was in Houston. First I went to the House at Pooh Corner, which was a really remarkable learning center that was developed by Helen Vitor, who was a very progressive and forward thinking educator. I think that she decided to start the House at Pooh Corner when she had twins who were my age and realized she was going to be in the business whether she wanted to be or not. She was going to be providing a lot of education for kids when she had her twins, Allison and Jennifer. So she started this wonderful little school. It's sort of like a Montessori School but I think very developed. Anyway I went there for a couple of years and then T.J. Pilgrim Elementary School in Larchmont in Houston. And then River Oaks Elementary from the second to the sixth grade or at least half of the second grade to the sixth grade. And then to Lanier Junior High for two years and then Saint Johns from ninth to the rest of high school.

HARGROVE: Did you go to A&M?

BRISCOE: I did go to A&M for a year. My freshman year I went to Southwestern University in Georgetown. Then I went to A&M for a year. I liked it a lot but I couldn't put a degree plan together. This was not a real familiar concept to me that the classes that you took had to actually fit together in some way that added up to a degree! I had gone there because I got a hold of their catalog and it was just like, "Wow cabinet making, organic gardening and all these wonderful things." But they didn't add up to a degree. Then they explained to me that you are going to be here forever if you don't somehow put these things together. I became more interested in writing and I finished my undergraduate work at the University of Texas in Austin.

HARGROVE: Did you have a favorite teacher or classmates that you would like to talk about?

BRISCOE: I had a very lively education all the way through. Of course, this was in Harris County not Fort Bend County. All of my teachers I think were exceptional people and dedicated. Helen Vitor was just wonderful.

HARGROVE: Did you have classmates that went to Vietnam?

BRISCOE: I didn't I was a little young for Vietnam.

HARGROVE: Oh you were younger than that.

BRISCOE: The draft ended two years before I was eligible. It's amazing that I don't have more interaction with vets because it was such an issue as I was growing up. It was all over the news and it just seemed to dictate, well, certainly influenced the national mood every day.

HARGROVE: The war was broadcast on TV every night. Every night there was the war scenes. You couldn't get through it without that.

BRISCOE: It was broadcast by people like Walter Cronkite, who was such a figure. It was probably the first war that came right into your living room and so fast, the same day.

HARGROVE: And when it was over, then we had Watergate. And Watergate was on the TV everyday. It was an anticlimax to the fact that Vietnam had just finished.

BRISCOE: It was not a way to honor that conflict and get beyond it. It was just kind of a sad next chapter in our history.

HARGROVE: From your Briscoe relatives in Richmond area, were any that held political offices?

BRISCOE: I believe that my uncle Mason was on the school board. I could be wrong. I know that my great uncle Mason was, I am pretty sure he was part of the board for, what was it called? Selective Service.

HARGROVE: Like the draft board?

BRISCOE: Yea exactly and my grandfather held several local offices. I can't even begin to name them. My father had been district attorney in Houston when I was growing up in Harris County. Later in his career he was Assistant District Attorney in Fort Bend County for a while, I guess that is not an elected office. Other than that I am sure there are several. I ran for Congress myself.

HARGROVE: Oh, you ran for Congress.

BRISCOE: In 2002.

HARGROVE: Did you win?

BRISCOE: I didn't. (laughter) I was beaten in the Democratic primary in a very good narrow race.

HARGROVE: All right, what do you do now?

BRISCOE: I am an architectural conservator. I work on historic buildings...some around here. I don't have too many projects around here. I do some things with the Foster Museum Association, sort of as an advisor. The other day we looked at a tenant building that may be donated to them. It was an interesting structure. I worked on Dorothy Harrison's place in Booth for a couple of years. Most of my projects are on the border near Laredo. There are some wonderful historic buildings there. I conserve, I restore, I rehabilitate, I write about rehabilitation in those resources. I just finished working on a jacal, which is an interesting kind of mesquite and mud plaster building that usually served as temporary structures for early settlers in that area.

HARGROVE: Any organizations that you are a member of?

BRISCOE: Well, I am a consultant for the Foster Museum Association. I have been on the board of a few organizations, my alumni association at Cornell, the Historic Preservation Planning Alumni - H.P.P.A. I was president and treasurer for awhile.

HARGROVE: Some of the changes in this area that you have seen in your adulthood?

BRISCOE: The development in this area is very very rapid. Generally unsustainable and not well planned. It is coming at a very great cost and is going to be very very difficult to maintain effectively and efficiently. I think the problem with the way we are growing is that we are are growing in a way that requires enormous amounts of infrastructure. Instead we need to be building more village-like communities where you can walk to work and the amount of infrastructure is dramatically reduced. And also provide transit centers. This concept of urban villages and even suburban villages, I think it is something we can do retroactively. And something we need to do, because we have to be able to provide alternative ways of transportation, otherwise you surrender enormous quantities of your landscape to automobiles and roads. There is a book called Suburban Nation, which seems to have been written about Fort Bend County. It says every year in this country we pave an area approximately equal to the size of Maryland. I would just be willing to bet a huge proportion of that paving happens here in Fort Bend County. Over farmland that is about the best in the world! I mean, we a have some of the deepest top soil and the best fertile land in the world and we are paving it. To me it is really misguided.

HARGROVE: Sugar Land and Stafford were farming communities and now Stafford is commercial and Sugar Land is residential and commercial. I grew up in Stafford where there was a farming community and now there is not one farmer that is participating in any farming. And Sugar Land has even less because of the sell off of the prison. That was what all that was left of acreage from farming and that's going to be gone.

BRISCOE: And there are people involved in Imperial Sugar, and the Kempner family. My uncle Mason was in charge of the agricultural part of that unit. Was that the Jester unit?

HARGROVE: Yes, the Jester Unit.

BRISCOE: I remember as a kid that's how we came out from Houston. We lived in Larchmont until I was seven and a half...gosh the Southwest Freeway... I guess we would come out the Southwest Freeway but it really wasn't a freeway, it was more... Maybe it was Alternate US Route 90 that's how we would come out. We take that to SH 6, when you would go north on SH 6 from Alternate US Route 90 you would see the inmates farming and...

HARGROVE: And the captain was on a horse and there were all the prisoners working in the fields, yes. I went to Sam Houston University and at that time, right before it became a university they would bring prisoners on to the campus and they would do labor right there on the campus. They would have the guard with them with the gun and the holster and all that. It wasn't unusual to see them and of course there were the prisons right there in town.

BRISCOE: Sam Houston University was big in law enforcement. Speaking of prisoners, my dad was too young for World War II, although he was part of the occupation forces in Japan. His older two brothers both served in active duty but there were German POWs that worked, I believe, on our farm. To bail hay and things that required a lot effort and a lot of hands. I don't know where the camp was but my dad always described the Germans as very happy to be there.

HARGROVE: Do you have a favorite memory of Fort Bend County?

BRISCOE: I have lots of favorite memories; the openness of the countryside when I was growing up. I mean the house where I live, the Home Place, which was built in 1898 by my great grandfather. It followed least one and possibly two earlier houses on that property within just a hundred feet of that house. It was SO out in the country.

When somebody went by you could hear them on the gravel road and they didn't drive very fast because it was a gravel road. My grandparents would try to guess, "I wonder who that was?" Now FM 723 goes all the way across FM 1093 which is Westheimer. It used to Tee and until about two years ago that's where it ended. Now it continues as Spring Green Road. My favorite memory was the openness of it... seemed to be something really healthy about it. But another one was; we had this weekend house a mile north of the Home Place at Settegast Road and FM 723 and we would go out in the fields and I could hear the singing on Sunday from Spring Green Baptist Church. It was really joyful sound, and last year I guess or maybe the year before, I started going to Spring Green once in awhile and it's a very happy memory. Also riding horses early in the morning and working cows. Our Christmas gatherings at the Home Place were just something else; it was overflowing with people, wonderful food, all family, just a very happy happy time.

HARGROVE: Do you remember any of the foods?

BRISCOE: Well, we always had ham, usually had some roast beef, turkeys sometimes but not all always. You would think that there would have always been a turkey but there wasn't.

HARGROVE: They substituted with roast beef.

BRISCOE: I guess and ham, they raise. I don't remember any hogs from my growing up. But my dad said they always had some hogs when he was a kid. They had sheep. I know they had some goats because I have seen pictures of some goats. The depression, they barely noticed it...

HARGROVE: They had their own. They were self-sufficient.

BRISCOE: They never were wealthy in the first place but they grew everything they need.

HARGROVE: Right they weren't dependent on anybody else. They supplied their own.

BRISCOE: Pretty much. I think that most of the little farms around there did, the same thing.

I have many many documents that I would like to share and I am finding more all the time; some wonderful letters from great grandfather to my great grandmother...during the flood of 1899, which was a remarkable event. And even a few much earlier letters from the 1860s, possibly one or two from the 1850s

HARGROVE: Do you know if any of your family served in the Civil War?

BRISCOE: I am sure they did but not my direct branch. My great-grandfather was born in 1850 or so... that would make him old enough to serve, well barely. Maybe he was born in 1852, I think he went to school in Virginia but I don't know.

HARGROVE: I am from Stafford and my family had Cangelosi Grocery in Stafford and a furniture store also. They were in the grocery business almost fifty years, our name was Cangelosi.

BRISCOE: Sure I know. Isn't there a Cangelosi who ran an agricultural business.

HARGROVE: Yes, John Cangelosi

BRISCOE: We had some nice visits. Is that business still open? I mean it's basically like a gardening supply place or something like that.

HARGROVE: No, the Cangelosi things that were my family are all closed down. Most of that closed in the '70s. But there is a Cangelosi tile and marble that is still open in Missouri City. John was in ranching and he was more a rancher than a gardening. My dad and his brother Tony were in the grocery and furniture store.

BRISCOE: I met one of your Cangelosi kin, seems like it he was involved with a nursery or a nursery supply place right on Main Street.

HARGROVE: That might have been, Pete Cangelosi. He had landscaping type of business.

BRISCOE: So they are Italian...

HARGROVE: Yes, they are from Sicily.

BRISCOE: Well one of my projects is in Vermont and there is a strong Italian influence. At some point, I think in probably the late 1800s, a lot of Italian stone workers came to Vermont. How did they the Cangelosi's find their way?

HARGROVE: They came in through New Orleans instead of going through Ellis Island. They ended up migrating to Bryan and living in the river bottoms in Brazos County. The problem was that there was flooding and it went on for seven years back about 1912 or 1916. Their crops kept being flooded out and so they weren't making their crops. Frank Cangelosi came to Houston looking for land and he ended up in Stafford, he saw that there was fertile land that was not close to the river and he went back to Bryan and told

his Brother we should buy property in Stafford away from the river. They came and started buying up property in that area and they bought about eleven blocks in Stafford and farmland outside of town.

HARGROVE: This is YOUR story. So I want to know if you have anything else you want to talk about?

BRISCOE: Hummm, I think this is very important work that you all are doing because Fort Bend County is a special place. It is obviously very very historic. As I work on the Texas border I become more aware of the cross roads from the border through this area; the Texas revolution and even earlier and there a number of important crossings at the Brazos. Those crossing points I think need to get more attention as we build and expand. We need to do the archeology research and not just sort of sweep over these.

One more interesting thing about my family from my work in South Texas, the Spanish settled that area basically by giving away land. If you moved to that area in the 1750s, as part of the settlement of an area called Nuevo Santander, you got a lot in town and you got a porción on the river, generally on the north side of the Rio Grande. Those porciones ran due north and south. They were very long and very narrow. The idea was to give the most number of people access to water year round. I think our land in the leagues on the north side of the Brazos was laid out in a similar way. They tend to be narrow strips of land and in our case I think its almost ten miles long from the Brazos to Katy Gaston Road, which was the northern boundary of the league of land that we got in the 1830s. It's only a couple of hundred yards wide and its almost due north and south. There is a significant realignment of FM 723 planned that is going to bend and deviate and the whole original concept is sort erased from the plan. Because of the physical geography I understand there are reasons that it needs deviate, but it is significant to me because this is the historic lay out of this area. I think that needs to be investigated and recorded and understood because it's part of the Anglo and Hispanic history of the settlement of this area.

HARGROVE: Good, very good. Thank you.

BRISCOE: Thank you very much

Interview ends