FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Frank Lee Barak**

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Interviewer: Tom Stavinoha

Transcriber: Olga Barr

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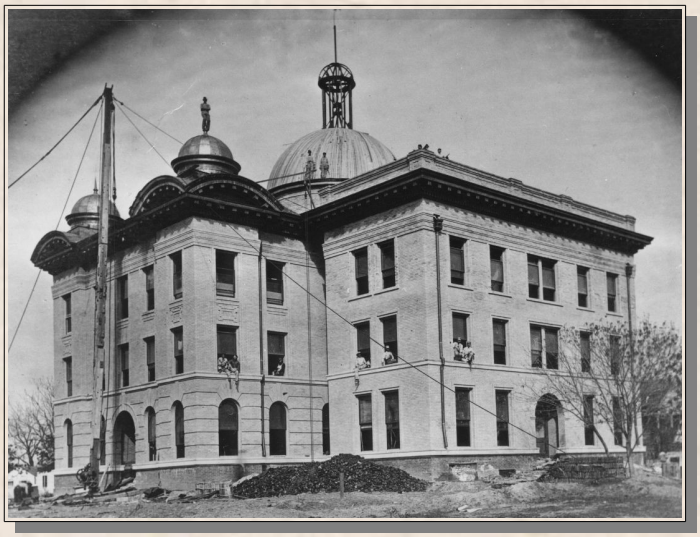

Transcript

STAVINOHA: How old are you?

BARAK: 91. I was born in Columbus, Texas.

STAVINOHA: How many were in your family?

BARAK: There were three boys and two girls. One brother died in Jourdanton when he was about two years old.

STAVINOHA: Jourdanton is towards San Antonio. When did y'all move to Fort Bend County?

BARAK: 1928. I was 7.

STAVINOHA: What school did you go to?

BARAK: I went to Needville. They had the big school here where the telephone company used to be.

STAVINOHA: What made y'all move from Columbus to Needville in Fort Bend County?

BARAK: My dad was working for people at that time named Hoopie. They were well-to-do people, and had a lot of land. We were living in Ellinger working for them when they bought some land in San Antonio. So he went down there as boss for about a year and a half or two. When work ran out, he worked in a gin. When that run out he went to work for a grocery store. There were a lot of eggs and a lot of chickens. He would load a pickup full of eggs and take them to San Antonio to sell. When that job played out we come to Needville.

STAVINOHA: What made y'all come to Needville?

BARAK: Well, Lad Shefeik, his wife and my mother were sisters, and they were living here. They said, "come on over here and go to farming." So we did. We lived with him and helped farm the first year. Then we moved onto Mr. Bill Jeske's place on Fairchild Creek in Fairchild. He had a mule and all the equipment and we farmed on half for two years. The first year we made a bale of cotton which wasn't too good.

STAVINOHA: On the whole field?

BARAK: Yes, on the whole field because it was raining. Next year we made twenty-one bales. That was better. By that time, Mr. Frank Shefeik, my uncle's brother, who lived on Hwy 36, had a farm in Boling. He told us we could work his farm in Boling, so we did—my dad took him up. We bought equipment and some mules from Johnny. He had them mules here in back of the store.

In those days people came to town in buggies or in wagons. You parked your wagon by the road and everybody would gather on the street. These streets were just nothing but solid people on Saturday. That's how people got to meet each other. You couldn't go just to a man's house 'cuz they were so far apart. So everybody would meet in town and then buy groceries. There were about five stores including a bakery that made bread.

STAVINOHA: I don't remember a theatre being here, but they say at one time there was one in town.

BARAK: There was a theatre here. We would go right by it when we went to school. Them days you could smoke in theatres and most everybody did. By the time we walked by going to school, all the butts were laying on the ground. We would pick some up to smoke. One mistake I made, I stuck it in my back pocket and my dad, who never helped my mom wash clothes, found that cigarette in my pocket. And I got it.

STAVINOHA: He didn't want y'all smoking at all. What kind of movies did y'all see?

BARAK: I'll tell you the truth, I don't know. I didn't go because I didn't have any money. We had money only for coffee, tobacco, sugar and flour. At home we had eggs, chicken and a big garden.

STAVINOHA: When y'all started farming in Boling that's when you finally got a tractor?

BARAK: Yes, we had a Fordson with a side. There were so many cockle burrs that they used two big old discs to cover them up. And then you took mules …and then you did your planting. Still them cockle burrs come up. Lots of times when we'd be pulling corn to haul to the barn you would go underneath them. You couldn't see because the cockle burrs got higher than our heads.

STAVINOHA: Did you have a planter that y'all pulled behind either the mules or the tractor?

BARAK: It had a one row planter, yes. And we planted sixty acres with this one row planter. We could do maybe 5-10 acres a day. It took dad one week to cultivate that sixty acres. Then we got kinfolks to come from Ellinger/Fayetteville to help us farm when my dad went to work at Duvall Sulfur Company.

About 1933 or 34, a storm come through. We didn't know nothing about it. It was raining that evening so hard my folks got scared. All the kids had to get up to see what the storm was going to do. It was a hurricane, but we had no radio so nobody knew anything about it.

STAVINOHA: Did it destroy lot of the crop?

BARAK: No, it happened after we harvested the crops.

STAVINOHA: How many acres did y'all farm?

BARAK: It was sixty acres plus we had 100 acre pasture for cows. It was a good pasture, lots of woods and the Bernard River ran through it. The cows would get their water out of the river which came from lots of springs. Some of the cows would get in that spring and bog down. Then we had to get a set of mules with a slide. The mules were on the bank and we would pull the slide down to load the cow onto the slide and pull them up.

STAVINOHA: And she didn't always want to corporate I would think. She'd fight; I can imagine how much fun that was. I had one like that. Lucky we had four-wheel drive; we'd just wrap around the horns and were able to drag her up and get on good ground. Using mules had to be pretty tough.

BARAK: If she laid in the slide too long, she lost blood circulation in her feet. So we had to lift her up, put a sack underneath her stomach and just let her feet touch the ground a little bit. She just hung there until finally she would get that blood circulation there so you could turn her loose.

STAVINOHA: How did you pick her up—you just had a blocking pickup from a tree—like you use when you butcher just to hang them up?

BARAK: Yeah, that's what we used to hang those hogs when we butchered them on a blocking pickup.

STAVINOHA: Did y'all raise any hogs too?

BARAK: Oh yeah. That's where most of our meat came from. We didn't eat cows because we didn't have too many. But if you had any cows to sell, that's how you'd have some money. So we ate pigs. There were seven of us in the family and we would butcher seven pigs. We would salt and smoke our bacon and sausage by placing it in salt water in crocks before smoking it. When we got through smoking, to keep them from drying out all the time, we would put them in crocks and momma would melt some hog grease and put on top to keep it moist.

STAVINOHA: Were you able to butcher anytime of the year or did you wait for cooler weather?

BARAK: Usually cooler weather because there was no icebox. We didn't know what an icebox was. It was all in winter time. By summer time, if we left some sausage hanging it was covered in white mildew. We took a rag and wiped it off to eat it anyway.

STAVINOHA: Did y'all ever hang any up in the attic in the house? I heard lot of people say they did that.

BARAK: No, we had a smokehouse. On Sunday we had chicken noodle soup. That's the only time we got to eat a chicken was on Sunday and it was chicken noodle soup.

STAVINOHA: Did y'all raise guineas? A lot of farmers back then raised guineas and had lot of guinea soup—even ducks.

BARAK: I don't know why but we didn't have guineas. Yeah they make good soup.

STAVINOHA: What about a garden. Did y'all have your own garden?

BARAK: Oh yeah, big garden. All the vegetables that we ate came out of the garden. Like I said, coffee, tobacco, sugar, and flour was bought—and that's all the money we had.

STAVINOHA: Did y'all can a lot of stuff in quart jars?

BARAK: Oh yes we did. We had a lot of peach trees so we canned peaches, sausage and canned pickles and made sauerkraut. We cooked the sausage, cut it up and put in jars. You put a little grease in there and turn it upside down so the grease would be on the lid to seal it to last a long time.

STAVINOHA: What year did you get married and what did you do to make a living?

BARAK: I got married in 1943 and went to work in Freeport during World War II building houses for Dow. They were building a bunch of houses. Then I had an offer to work in the Houston shipyard so I worked there but I was fixing to get drafted. They told me not to worry that they could keep me out. I was registered for the draft in Wharton. But they said they didn't go that far so I went into the Airforce.

STAVINOHA: But if you would have been living in Houston, working shifts that the military needed…

BARAK: I would have gotten deferred for a while; instead, I served 4 ½ years as an airplane mechanic. I never did go overseas. The Airforce had gliders – an airplane without a motor. They were made out of canvas and we worked on them.

STAVINOHA: I flew in one here two years ago.

BARAK: I stayed in Arkansas for a year then they shipped me to Alabama to work an engineering job in the Henry Ford's plant. They were making cars and twenty-fours – an airplane with four motors. A twenty-four was kind of like a box and was one of the biggest planes they had. I went there and learned to be a crew chief. The crew chief had to go up with the plane for a pre-flight. You would start each of the four motors one at a time. Sometimes that fourth motor wouldn't start, so you put on all the brakes so it wouldn't take off.

From there I went to Chanute, Illinois to electrical school. They were fixing to come out with a twenty-nine - the biggest plane at that time. The twenty-nine was all electric, so I went to an electric school to learn how to work on them.

STAVINOHA: Were these planes for cargo or bombers?

BARAK: No, they were fighter. The seventeens were mostly for Europe while the twenty-fours fought down in Italy and places like that. When the twenty-nines came out, I was a crew chief and I wanted to get off but they wouldn't let me. So I told them,

"I'll volunteer to go overseas," and they said, "okay." They got me all ready, processed me and shipped me to Nebraska. You could only carry a pack of forty-four pounds on an airplane when you went. So I had my bag and was ready to go that night when Japan gave up. They knocked Japan out and I had enough points to stay in the United States.

STAVINOHA: Now you said you got married in 1943.

BARAK: Yeah, my wife followed me to Arkansas but then moved back here and stayed with her sister.

STAVINOHA: I know you've got the two daughters. Did you have any kids while you were in the service?

BARAK: We had one in 1944. When we got home she was just a baby. I went to work for Jefferson Lake Sulfur Company over here at Long Point.

STAVINOHA: Sulfur, there were a lot of fields if I remember back then. There was Long Point and New Gulf. What other fields?

BARAK: Duval Sulfur Company, that's where my daddy worked. When you cross the river bridge going to Boling used to be on the left-hand side about two miles.

STAVINOHA: What was your job over at the sulfur field—the Jefferson Lake?

BARAK: I drove a Caterpillar.

STAVINOHA: I've always heard stories about how derricks would sink into the ground because they pumped so much sulfur out of the ground. Do you recall any incident?

BARAK: Long Point used to be solid, now it's all sunk down and a big lake is there. In Brazoria, by the state farm, the bedrock was up so high that it didn't sink. They don't have any lakes there. They had to drill through that rock where they pumped sulfur out then they had to shoot mud in there to stop the sulfur. You melt that sulfur and it will run down into the place where you took it out. So you fill it up with mud mixers.

STAVINOHA: So at Long Point—they took boiling water and pushed it in the ground where it melted the sulfur forcing the sulfur up? So was there really water in those caverns then?

BARAK: No, it would come out. They would send that water down there, melt that sulfur, and with air they would push the sulfur up and get it out.

STAVINOHA: Okay, with the hot water.

BARAK: They had places called bleed oil well—a big lake that they would pump in all salty water. It would kill anything.

STAVINOHA: Is that why they had the little reservoirs? I think there was three different reservoirs they had out there to hold that salty water.

BARAK: If Big Creek was on the rise and that lake was full, they would let a little of it out to make some room. They had to make more lakes to hold that salty water.

STAVINOHA: So you spent most of your working life there at Jefferson Lake at Long Point?

BARAK: Well yeah I went to Long Point but for some reason, I went to Dow at Freeport with a fellow welder named Joe Niscavits. They was paying $1.75 an hour and we were getting $1.35 as welders. We stayed a year but we didn't make any money because we were off all the time due to rain.

So I went back to the sulfur company and stayed there eleven years.

Then Houston Lighting & Power Company built the generators over at Thompson and I went to work there at the power plant taking care of boilers and stuff like that. Most of the

boilers were steam and I took care of the smaller boilers. They had big ones that would turn and make electricity.

STAVINOHA: Did they use gas to boil the water?

BARAK: Yeah. Gas and oil, but we didn't use oil much because there was plenty of gas. Once in a while, for maybe a week, we would burn oil and then we'd go back to gas again.

STAVINOHA: The plant was built in 1950, so that was about 1961?

BARAK: Yeah. There were a lot of geese and catfish in the lake.

STAVINOHA: Well I guess back then there was a lot more rice around here so the geese would go to the rice field and go back to the lake at night. It seemed like the sky would be white early in the morning with the geese picking up and going back to the fields. Did they let y'all fish the lake?

BARAK: When Mr. Ripple was there he would let us catch enough fish to have a fish fry at the plant. When he left the other boss said "No fishing." We'd walk out to the intakes and just throw you a line out there to get some fish anyway.

STAVINOHA: Getting back to growing up, where did you go to school?

BARAK: I went to school in Boling / Lago but I only went through the eighth grade. There were about six classes at the whole school.

STAVINOHA: Did you walk to school?

BARAK: We walked and that was a long way. They finally got a bus to take us.

STAVINOHA: When did you finally move to Needville?

BARAK: Whenever I came back from the service. I moved to

Rosenberg when I worked for Jefferson Lake. Then I moved to Freeport to work in construction for a year. I had a chance to open a liquor store in Guy at the corner of Highway 36 and Long Point Road in 1948 or 49. Then later I opened Bosack's beer joint.

STAVINOHA: Who was it that had this grocery store in old Guy?

BARAK: That was Hoodka.

STAVINOHA: And they had the cotton gin there?

BARAK: They had a cotton gin. That was the Stratsky. A guy named Krueger tried to build one over on this side of the track, but I think he ran out of money.

STAVINOHA: Growing up what kind of games did y'all play when you were kids. You said you had a fairly big family so what were some of your favorite games and did y'all ride horses?

BARAK: Mostly baseball, if we could get enough players. I had a horse when we lived in Boling and would ride with a neighbor boy who also had a horse. My brothers didn't ride a horse and another brother died when he was about two years old.

STAVINOHA: You said when y'all first started farming with Mr. Schfeik y'all had mules.

BARAK: No, not when we helped Lad. Now Mr. Jeske had mules, a cultivator and everything. My daddy would go there to feed the mules and take care of them just like they were his own. Mr. Jeske didn't do nothing. My dad did all the labor for only half of the money.

STAVINOHA: Do you remember any stories with the mules when they were in the field?

BARAK: Yeah, you'd pull sweep stuff when cotton got big you couldn't cultivate it.

STAVINOHA: That was just one big sweep?

BARAK: Yeah one big sweep and one mule pulled it. When something scared the mule you had to hold the handle with two hands and put the ring around your neck. That thing pulled you and the mule would go across and cotton would be flying up in the air. Oh yeah that happened many a time.

STAVINOHA: Did you ever have a case where the mule got stubborn or just didn't want to do anything.

BARAK: Oh yeah, we had one named Red, who sometimes wouldn't move. Mules are so smart, that when we are cultivating and noon came, they knew it was dinner time. Every time we would come to the end of a row they didn't want to go, they didn't want to turn, they wanted to go home.

STAVINOHA: How long of a rest did you have to give them during noon before you could get them to move again?

BARAK: We'd give them some ear corn. That's all we had to feed them was 4-5 ears of corn.

STAVINOHA: Did you have to water them during the day while they were in the field or did they pretty much drink enough in the morning?

BARAK: In the morning, at dinner time and then in the evening they got their water.

STAVINOHA: How many hours could you get out of a mule? Eight hours would be about the most or were they pretty reliable?

BARAK: We started out at least by 6:00 am and went to noon. Then start again at 1:00 pm and if it was light, we'd stay 'til 7:00 or 8:00 pm.

STAVINOHA: It was a long, long day then. My only remembrance of using a mule was when we were cutting corn tops. Sometimes the corn got so tall that we'd take knives and machetes cutting tops off the corn while the mule walked along.

BARAK: And also we used horses for dusting. When cotton was big you had to put a sack on an end of a stick with all that poison mixed up. And then load it on the horse and that thing would bounce and you would dust the cotton.

STAVINOHA: Seems like sulfur was pretty common to dust with and no telling what else it was. Probably all illegal to use right now [laughs]. Pretty powerful stuff. Well that dusting—some of that had to be done pretty early in the morning to stick to the leaves.

BARAK: If it was a little dew, it would be better because the dust would stick to them leaves.

STAVINOHA: And do a better job of killing bugs then.

BARAK: Well if you had a couple of horses you'd load one of them 'til he got pretty tired and then you'd get on another one and do the same.

STAVINOHA: Anything in particular you remember—some incidents that happened that were kind of funny when you were growing up. When did you get your first car?

BARAK: I got a '37 Ford. I bought it in Houston for a hundred and something dollars. I kept it for a while and then I went to Fatjo—I don't know if you remember.

STAVINOHA: I remember Fatjo.

BARAK: He had that Chevrolet place in Richmond. I bought a brand new '41 Chevrolet. I made enough money working at Freeport to buy my first new car. But a lot of times, if I didn't have quite enough money, my folks would help me. Then I'd have to pay them back.

STAVINOHA: Driving to Freeport was a pretty long trip. What kind of roads did they have?

BARAK: Going from here to Bernard River, the bridge was impossible to pass. Oh man, you'd get stuck and people had to come and pull you out. That was the worst place but the rest of the roads were pretty good. Finally they built Highway 36 with concrete. It was built in 1936 and that's the reason it was named that.

Whenever we got to Freeport we had a big celebration. The speed limit was only 25 mph. When I was in the service, I was stationed at Wichita Falls for a while. I drove that Chevrolet and the speed limit was 35 mph. It took a long time.

STAVINOHA: Two days of driving I would think. Were there enough filling stations back then to get gas?

BARAK: Cars hardly used any gas. You had to do your own gas pumping. They didn't have electric pumps. You had to pump gas up to a globe and then put the hose into the car's tank to get a few gallons.

STAVINOHA: What kind of weekend entertainment was there, such as dances?

BARAK: Needville, Fairchilds, and Guy would take turns having dances. The band that were playing was Joe Nesvadba, a string band from around here. Also, the Cowboys band out of Houston.

STAVINOHA: Houston bands came down here to play?

BARAK: Yes, and we had bands coming from Ellinger too. I can't think of their names.

STAVINOHA: I understand there was a Pekar Band in Damon.

BARAK: You know at one time I had a dancehall at Guy.

Business wasn't too good so I hired the Pekar's. They agreed to play on commission since I was in a financial hole. After they played, I came out even.

STAVINOHA: What were some of the brands of beer they had way back then?

BARAK: Grand Prize, Sun Select, and Lone Star was delivered on certain days of the week.

STAVINOHA: If I remember everything got recycled. That was always the fun part going to a dance, picking up bottles and cashing them in for a nickel a case. We had competitions from Mr. Bill Strimple at Fairchild to pick up beer bottles. I guess that will wrap it up.

Interview Ends.