# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Harry Lee Mellon**

Interview Date: 01/21/2012

Interviewer: Diane L. Ware

Transcriber: Olga Barr

Location: Grace Community Church, Richmond, Texas 30 Pages





*Transcript*

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

MELLON: I was born in Richmond, April 29, 1935. I think I was delivered at Hermann Hospital. They rushed me to the hospital in Houston. I don't know if they had facilities in Richmond at that time or not.

WARE: What first brought your family to Richmond?

MELLON: Daddy, Sam Mellon, came originally from Poland. I believe it was Warsaw, Poland. Mother came from Chancelerkof. I hope I don't have those two backwards. I have to look on the marriage certificate. They didn't meet until daddy was in Richmond. Daddy, I believe, came from Detroit. There was a gentleman that came down here, and daddy came with him. He landed up in Richmond. He went to work for a dry goods store. The man's name was Ben Robinson. They lived in Richmond. His wife was Cecilia Robinson. He had a dry goods store right next to Daily & Levy on the corner across from where Sandy McGee's Restaurant is now. Somewhere down the line he went on his own in the grocery business. He had a store about where the barbershop is now. It was a grocery store with an upstairs. I can remember living upstairs because I fell down that flight of stairs! I believe daddy bought that grocery store from a man by the name of Sanders. You go back in the history, and I believe you will find a Sanders Grocery Store.

WARE: What were the cross streets of the grocery store?

MELLON: It was Morton Street. In those days, we didn't go by names, we just knew where the locations were. The street that is between the A. P. George building and Third or Fourth Street.

WARE: What was your mom's first name and maiden name?

MELLON: Cecile Seltzer. There is a group of Seltzers in Houston that spell it without the T.

WARE: Was the name Mellon Anglicized?

MELLON: Originally it was Melinsky. When they came through immigration, he probably shortened it to Mellon.

WARE: Your father moved down here with a friend from Detroit. Do you know what their intent was when they moved down?

MELLON: No, I think the friend, Herbert Margolis, was the type of person that liked to roam, and he took daddy and they came down here. Daddy stayed in Richmond.

WARE: How old was your dad when he moved down here?

MELLON: I don't know.

WARE: Did your mother work?


*Harry Mellon, 3-years old, standing in front of his father, Sam, owner of Mellon's Grocery & Meat Market, in Richmond, Texas, in 1938.*

MELLON: Yes, when they got married very young, they started that grocery store together. There are certain parts of that store that started in the W. B. Sanders building. After that, he went to Rosenberg. He had a grocery store, and Butler and Grimes bought him out. He had a grocery store on the main drag in Rosenberg. He went back to Richmond, and then he built his own grocery store right across from where the Lamar Theater is. I was three years old when he built that store. I was born in '35, so that had to be about 1938.

WARE: Did he run more than one store at a time, or did he move from location to location?

MELLON: He moved. I went all through college, then daddy had a heart attack — had several. I graduated from college in '58. Just before then, he finally sold the store. There is a lot of history with the store.

WARE: Tell me your earliest childhood recollections of being in the store, what you were doing, what was going on.

MELLON: In those days, people really didn't have much refrigeration. They bought meats and produce almost every day. I delivered groceries to people's homes and some of them didn't have a refrigerator, they had an icebox.

You know the difference between an icebox and refrigerator? With an icebox, you take a block of ice and you put it in there, and that is your refrigeration for your milk and your meat goods. Since the ice melts, it doesn't maintain a cold temperature. So, we delivered every day to some people. Some of the accounts were low-income people.

We delivered groceries to the A. P. George estate on A. P. George Road. Mr. George had already died. I couldn't drive. I was still a youngster, but I took the basket in and delivered it to Mrs. George. She had this beautiful dining room table, and always had a basket of fruit. I put the fruit in the basket and everything. She came out about the time that I was leaving and said, "Young Mellon, why don't you take one of those apples with you." I said, "Thank you, Mrs. George." I'd take the apple and get in the truck with the driver, and go back to the store. Then I'd ask my dad about it because I didn't understand why Mrs. George offered me an apple. I didn't turn it down because that would be rude. We had apples here in the store. He said, "You did the right thing, she was just being polite. She wasn't thinking that we deliver those apples from the store, that they are on the rack." Anyway, I thought that was cute, and I still remember that. We had other accounts like Tom and Agnes Booth. We delivered to them out in Booth, Texas.

WARE: It is a long way away?

MELLON: Long way away. Lots of times, Tom came in with his driver and bought a lot of groceries. The thing I remember about him so much is he always had some type of animal on his shoulder, a pet monkey or something like that. I always wanted to run up there and see the monkey, or parrot or whatever he had on his shoulder.

Then we had accounts like Winfrey's BBQ. We used to deliver the ribs for him to barbecue right off Morton Street. The road right next to the railroad is Calhoun. I believe that is probably Third Street, which is right across from the new saloon that they built. We delivered ribs constantly for Winfrey when he was living. Then his son took over. I think it was Alvin. I don't think he kept the BBQ very long.

Richmond was the county seat of Fort Bend County. In those days it was very, very active. I have pictures showing how active it was. You had people from Sugar Land come in to Richmond to buy their groceries. There was only one store in Sugar Land. It was called the General Mercantile Store right across the track next to the Imperial Char House. All the people that lived in Thompson and Booth and some from Rosenberg, Stafford, DeWalt, and Sugar Land, all came to the county seat, which was Richmond. That is why you had so many grocery stores down Morton Street.

*Imperial Sugar Plant Char House at left, and the product that built Sugar Land at right.*

WARE: Name some of them.

MELLON: Start on the corner where Pop Joseph started that store in 1928, if I am not mistaken. Pop Joseph and Richard Joseph, on that corner. Across the street, where there is a parking lot today, there was the Red and White Store, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Lee Richie. Now as we go down the street going west on the Lee Richie side, next to him we call a feed store. I think Tom Fatjo owned that feed store. Behind the feed store, Tom and Doris Fatjo had the Chevrolet dealership.

He had that block like an "L" behind the Red and White, Lee Richie store, to the next block where you come up all the way over to where Beard has their real estate office right on that corner. The only thing that separated that street from the other street was a little alley that is still there behind the A. P. George Building. That little alley came into where my dad had his grocery store.


*Chevrolet car dealership owned by Tom and Doris Fatjo.*

You had Red and White Store, then you had the feed store, then Jack Smith was a grocery merchant — Sadie and Jack Smith. Next to them was our store called Mellon's IGA — Independent Grocers Association. When you left our store, you had The Texas Coaster. That was a newspaper for Fort Bend County. Now it is known as the Herald Coaster. Next to that you had a drugstore. But before the drugstore was built where the A. P. George Building is today, you had P. J. Davis Bank Building. They tore that down, then they built that drugstore there. That property was owned by A. P. George. Then they took down the drugstore and The Texas Coaster. Now you have the new A. P. George building.

Now if you go back across the street from Joseph, and you had the Lamar Theater. To the left side, was McFarland's Barbershop. On the right side, was a shoemaker who had two little places in the theater in the center. Next to the theater, you had the Sam Reinke Grocery Store. Next to Sam Reinke, you had another grocery store run by the Oshman family. Next to that, you had Covell and Covell Plumbing Store. Somewhere in there, you had the Paul Muller Pharmacy. As we go down the street going west, the next big store, two stories, was the Robinowitz Brothers Department Store, which right now is a mural. Across the street going west, on the corner where Italian Maid is, there was The First National Bank, Mr. August Myer. Next to him was Edelstein's Grocery Store.

WARE: Great Scott, that is a lot of grocery stores in that one area.

MELLON: Like I started the conversation, Richmond was the county seat, and everybody came to Richmond to buy their groceries. Next to Edelstein, you had the National Hotel and Restaurant/Café. Upstairs they had rooms that were rented out, many, many rooms up there.

Now I want to talk a little bit about the National Hotel. Shorty Groggan ran the little café there. He is shown in that picture that I showed you.

WARE: He is a very short man.

MELLON: We used to deliver groceries to him. I was a very young butcher, but I learned the trade of butchering cows when I was very young. They called the store, and said we need a pound of hamburger meat, or we need a T-bone. Dad would say, "Run this over right away, but don't go in the front door, go in the alley." He didn't want the customers to see that it was being delivered. So, I put it together, and I run it over there. He had fresh hamburger meat, or somebody ordered a T-bone instead of the type of steak that he had in service. I still remember that.

Also, if you ever look at the National Hotel on the backside, you will see a lot of winding staircases that come down. Of course, there were a lot of fights. Those staircases were there so when somebody busted into a room for a shoot-em-up, they could disappear down the stairs and catch the train when it was coming through town. That is the reason all the staircases are on the backside.

WARE: Good reason.

MELLON: Good reason. Let me see if I can finish going down the street. From the National Hotel you ended up at the Five & Ten Cent Store, which was started by Pete Oshman, and later Poy Levey, who was his father-in-law.

WARE: Now is this the Oshman family that went on to have Oshman Sporting Goods in Houston?

MELLON: No, it is a different family, completely different. Pete Oshman had a daughter, Irene, and Poy married her and carried on that Five & Ten Cent Store until they finally sold out. Right next to it, was a drugstore, I want to say Duncan, but I am not sure of that. Sidney, my brother, may remember. Next to the drugstore, you had the Post Office where Sandy McGee is. That was the Post Office.

I guess you know there is a statue behind the Post Office. I think it is Carrie Nation. There was a statue back there. I helped to remodel one of the houses—I don't know where it is today, but we moved it over to where Wessendorff had the lumber company across the railroad tracks. Whether it is still there I don't know.

WARE: Over at Decker Park?

MELLON: Decker Park, but I helped work on that when we moved it.

WARE: Is it the McNabb home?

MELLON: It may be the McNabb home.

WARE: It is still there.

MELLON: I remember Jim Prowell and I got together to work on that. Jim worked for Wessendorff Real Estate.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read Joe Robinson's and Pat and Dean McDonald's interviews on this website at https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=26228 and https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=38861 for their experiences working for the Wessendorff Foundation and Real Estate.

WARE: Tell me, did you deliver groceries out to DeWalt?

MELLON: I think we did. What I remember most about DeWalt was the oil wells that were there. Most of them are abandoned today. But you went down Highway 6, and there was a little DeWalt Grocery store right there. But we would still do stuff down that road there.

WARE: You delivered things to the grocery store and to the families?

MELLON: No, to the families that were back there.

WARE: Did you ever deliver to the big house out there?

MELLON: No, not that I recall.

WARE: Was the Humble Camp back there.

MELLON: Humble Camp, that is exactly right. You see a lot of the workers had to cash their checks. They worked in Houston, but they lived out here. They came to my dad's grocery store, and we cashed their checks free of charge, and they bought their groceries and checked out. Once a week this happened, mostly on the weekends because they worked during the week.

> EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read Sally Raushig Kelly's interview on this website at https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=42120 for her experiences with the Humble Camp.

WARE: So you had to have a large supply of cash on hand?

MELLON: A very large supply.

WARE: Did you ever have any robberies?

MELLON: Never had any robberies. We were very cautious.

WARE: What was the name of the driver or the drivers?

MELLON: At that time, we probably went through a lot of help. It seems like Lightning was maybe one of them.

WARE: Did you have more than one driver or just usually one in the truck?

MELLON: Usually one in the truck. This is some information you will enjoy. We had two butchers. I haven't talked about Daily and Levy on the corner over there across from Sandy McGee's. They had groceries, hardware, and so forth. The two butchers that daddy had were Emmett Love and Curtis Gaston. There was so much business that daddy had to have two butchers in the meat market. We did not have processed meat the way you have it today. You go in a store and pick up a chicken already cut up. We had a farm in Booth, 250 acres, and we raised our own cattle. We butchered the cattle out there, brought them to the store, and cut them up. I can remember butchering the cattle. We had a slaughterhouse out there. We brought it in, cut it up, saved the hides, and salted them down. We had a cooler. The hide man came through once a month and bought the hides. When they had too many holes in them, daddy jumped on me for cutting too close to the skin.

Emmett Love went off to the military service. When he came back, he started his own grocery store called Love's Grocery Store over here west of the Richmond City Hall, right there on Morton Street.


*Emmett & Shirley Love in their grocery store on Morton Street in Richmond, Texas ca. 1948*

WARE: Now, Emmett and Curtis were both white?

MELLON: Yes, both of them were white. Curtis Gaston was Tiny R. L. Gaston's brother. Skeeter Gaston, they were all brothers.

WARE: Did they start their own store?

MELLON: At one time Curtis had a store. He went over across the river by Larry's Mexican Restaurant, right on 90A. Before that, E. G. Grocery was there, Now the interesting thing is that people came to Richmond on a Saturday. They didn't have anything else to do. They came in teams of mules and wagons. They pulled up by the City Hall on that side street going to the railroad track. If you go there today, you will still see a water trough there. That water trough watered all the teams that were pulled up all the way to the railroad track. They walked from there to the grocery stores. Then on Saturday, we had these drawings at the corner over there across from where Italian Maid is. They got a token or little ticket, and they drew for these groceries.

*People got free bags of groceries in drawings on Saturday in downtown Richmond back in the late 40's and early 50's.*

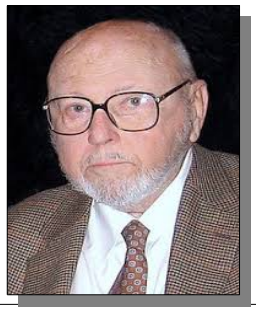
Each merchant donated so many bags of groceries. With all these grocery stores you can imagine how many bags were donated. Tom Fatjo brought his truck out, and they got on top of it. At 5:00 in the evening, the crowd was all around the four corners, and that truck pulled right in the center. If you had the winning ticket, you got a bag of groceries. That was a big thing, HUGE.

Going back to the City Hall, you know there used to be a swimming pool there. Now there is a water tank on top of it. I used to swim in that swimming pool. It got to a point where they had a lot of arguments about it, so they finally just covered it up and put a water tank on top of it.

WARE: What kind of arguments did they have? Segregation type arguments?

MELLON: Yes, it was segregation, and they could not solve the problems. So, I think the mayor, Hilmar Moore, decided the easiest thing to do was to get rid of the pool. They got rid of the pool.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Hilmar Guenther Moore was the longest serving mayor in the history of the United States. On September 22, 1949, he was appointed to fill an unexpired term as the Mayor of Richmond, Fort Bend County, Texas. After that, he won 32 consecutive elections, and served a total of 63 years as Mayor. Hilmar Guenther Moore died on December 4, 2012, at the age of 92.



WARE: When you're talking about the drawings for the groceries, about what years was this before World War II?

MELLON: I would say probably '47 to 50s, somewhere in there. I don't know how many years they had it.

WARE: You have described the different businesses and all. You had two butchers on staff. Were they on staff all week or just on weekends?

MELLON: No, all week.

WARE: So there is a driver. There was your mother, your father and you.

MELLON: They had two other people in the store. Bill was one of them. I don't know his last name.

WARE: They were just clerks mainly?

MELLON: Yes. Mother and daddy were there every day. We had to run the store because of refrigeration. Daddy even came down on Sunday morning for a half a day because people wanted to get some meat; seven days a week. They did not deliver from Houston, so Daddy used to go get produce. We got up at four in the morning and drove to Houston, and got to the Farmer's Market, which was where Hobby Center is now, and got the produce. I stayed with the truck and watched the merchandise while daddy walked around and picked up a crate of lettuce, a crate of tomatoes, and bananas and everything. Then we came back to the store and hade it open by seven o'clock. Then daddy took a nap in the afternoon and mother ran the store.

WARE: How old were your parents when they passed away?

MELLON: Daddy died very young at 57 from the heart problems. I've always felt I was living on borrowed time. I will be 77 in April. Maybe I have my grandfather's genes.

WARE: And your mother, how old was your mother?

MELLON: Mother was 93, I believe. She passed away about five years ago.

WARE: Did your siblings work in the store also?

MELLON: Yes, Harry (me), Rochelle, and Sidney. All of us worked in the store. Each one of us had a different job. On Saturday night, it was so busy you couldn't walk the sidewalks. I was charged with running the ice cream. We got half gallons of ice cream, and we had a refrigerated freezer up front. I served ice cream cones. People walking wanted an ice cream cone so I took care of that.

On New Years, we had fireworks. We sold lots of fireworks. My job was stacking the fireworks in the corner and selling them.

All the stores were sort of a general mercantile that carried drugs. I used to get a marble out of the Garrett snuff. Garrett snuff came in a brown bottle, and it had dots underneath it. How strong you wanted the Garrett snuff, one, two, three, or four dots. People dipped snuff. I did know the difference. Then a lady came in and said, "No, no that is not the one I want; I want the other one." I said, "They are all the same." She said, "No they are not all the same; turn it over." Sure enough, there were dots on the bottom of the bottle.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Snuff bottles were made with marks on the bottom because many people back then were illiterate. The number of dots indicated the "strength" of the product. They let the workers know which labels went on which bottles as the bottles were packed prior to being labeled. This explanation came from an aged and wise old tobacco farmer from Kentucky. The "more dots, stronger snuff".

*-- https://www.bottlemysteries.com/2008/08/snuff-bottle-mystery/*

The other thing I remember is that most of the ladies made their own dresses. We handled what we called Bewley's Best Flour in 50-pound sacks. They came in different cotton BAGS that had prints on them. The flour was the same, but the sacks were different. So, there may be a yellow print with flowers on it. There may be a green print. Mrs. Jones or whoever it was that came in said, "Young Mellon, let me look at that 50-pound bag of flour two down." So, I took the one off and she looked at it. "Let me look at that other one." And it was down on the bottom of the stack. Well, by the time she got through, I had gone through all the flour. I asked daddy, "Every time they come in, it is always the one on the bottom that they want. It is never the one on the top." He said, "Son, that is just the way it is."

WARE: They weren't shopping for flour but for the prints?

MELLON: In those days we gave out S&H stamps. The reason we gave out the stamps is that women could accumulate them and buy things for themselves. If they wanted lipstick, their husband wasn't going to let them buy that. They saved stamps and redeemed them stamps for some articles of what we call toiletries. They weren't going to spend MONEY on something like that. That is why we gave out stamps.

EDITOR'S NOTE: S&H Green Stamps are a discontinued line of trading stamps popular in the United States from the 1930s until the late 1980s. They were distributed as part of a rewards program operated by the Sperry & Hutchinson company (S&H), founded in 1896 by Thomas Sperry and Shelley Byron Hutchinson.

*--Wikipedia*


WARE: When they had the 50-pound bags of flour, how old were you?

MELLON: I think I was about eight, or nine, or ten years old because it was hard for me to lift that flour. I will never forget that. It seems like I ended up on that job all the time. The other thing that I had to do as a youngster was make soap. Since we had the butchering going on, we had a lot of tallow left over. So, daddy took a cardboard box and showed us how to mix the tallow and lye and bring it to a boil and pour it into a cardboard box. It was only about two and a half inches high. You put the wax paper in, and you poured that full of lye and tallow. Then after it hardened, I took a big, old butcher knife and cut bars of soap. We sold that for a nickel a piece. Daddy got on me sometimes because I wouldn't cut them equal. He said. "they have got to be EQUAL, because I am going to get complaints." So, I had to be very careful when I cut the bars of soap. We didn't wrap them, we just stacked them up on the floor in an octagon-shaped display. People went by, picked up a bar of soap, and it cost them a nickel.

WARE: So you raised your own cattle, and you butchered your own cattle and hung them and everything right there. You sold the hides from the cattle. You took the tallow, the fat,and you made soap out of it. What happened to the bones?

MELLON: Soup bones are made from the knee of the cow. I was taught how to trim most of the meat off it. People bought bones to make soup. Sometimes I got fussed at because I didn't cut enough meat off it, and sometimes I was so good, I cut all the meat off of it. Daddy said, "You can't sell that bone, it is nothing but bone. You have got to have a little meat on it." So I had to be careful.

WARE: Your dad gave you a great education.

MELLON: Oh, he did! We bought a lot of groceries from Grocery Supply. The president of Grocery Supply was Mr. Levitt. He made it a policy to come visit all the small stores. One day he was in the store visiting dad. I was home from college, and walked in the store. Daddy said, "This is Mr. Levitt." I said, "Hi, Mr. Levitt." He said, "Young Mellon I can't wait 'til you graduate college. I have a store for you whenever you graduate." Daddy was just smiling away. I looked at Mr. Levitt and said, "Mr. Levitt, I really appreciate it, but I DON'T want to be in the grocery business. I don't ever want to see a grocery store! But I really appreciate the offer." Mr. Levitt was really nice. He said, "Well young Mellon, whenever you change your mind, you let me know, and I will set you up. I will furnish the money for you to have a grocery store and so forth."

That night when I got home, daddy just about gave me a spanking. He said, "How could you turn down an offer like that? That man was willing to put up all the money!" I said, "Well, dad, I don't want to be in the grocery business. I am tired of handling those can goods, little items back and forth, back and forth, sacking groceries." I will never forget that look that he gave me.

WARE: Where did you go to college?

MELLON: I went to the University of Houston. I was getting a bachelor of science. Daddy was on my back. He said, "I want you to have a business degree. You can do that later, but I want that business degree so you can go into a business." I said, "I want to do photography." I already had a studio. I was doing that on the side, by the way. He said, "You are going to have that business degree." So, I changed my major I only needed 12 hours for my second degree and I never got it, Bachelor of Science. I got a business degree, general business. Then Uncle Sam got me. Uncle Sam, that is another story, the Army.

WARE: Before we get there, Mr. Levitt. I have heard his name before because he is pretty famous.

MELLON: He is pretty famous. I think he has passed on now, and his sons are running his store now.

WARE: You were the oldest in the family. You started college in '53, and they offered a degree in photography at U of H?

MELLON: One of the few schools that offered a degree in photography.

WARE: Did you commute there, or did you live over there?

MELLON: I commuted, and the final couple of years, I stayed at the dorm.

WARE: Had anyone in your family gone to college before you went to college?

MELLON: Neither one of them; mother and dad barely got through high school.

WARE: How important was it to them for you to go to college?

MELLON: A hundred percent. They worked day and night so they had enough money to send me to the University of Houston. All three of us graduated from the University of Houston, Rochelle, Sidney, and myself.

WARE: You went to school in Richmond. What schools did you go to?

MELLON: I started out in Richmond at Jane Long School, which is still there. Then past the fourth grade, we had another elementary school. It was a two-story building that they tore down. We went from the fourth to the eighth grade there. During the sixth grade, Texas City had the blast on the ship. We felt that blast in that school. The windows rattled all the way from Texas City. We didn't know what it was, and we didn't know what to do. I think Mrs. Bell was my teacher at that time in that class. From there, I went to Rosenberg High School. I think we were in the first ninth grade class to go into the new Lamar Consolidated High School between Richmond and Rosenberg at that time.

**EDITOR'S NOTE: April 16, 1947 – Fertilizer explosion kills 581 in Texas**
A giant explosion occurred during the loading of fertilizer (ammonium nitrate) onto the freighter *SS Grandcamp* at a pier in Texas City, Texas. Nearly 600 people lost their lives and thousands were injured when the ship was literally blown to bits. (http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/fertilizer-explosion-kills-581-in-texas )

WARE: Let's back up to that building that you were telling me about that was the two-story building where you felt the blast. It was just two stories?

MELLON: It was two stories, I believe I am right, two stories. I believe that building was built in 1908.

WARE: Did it have a basement?

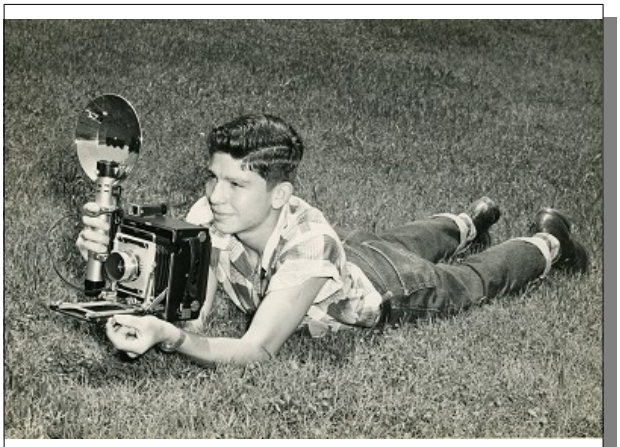
MELLON: No, but at the top of the building it had a tower with a big bell to ring, like you have at church where you pull the rope. It is funny how you remember different things.

WARE: How did your elementary and your high school education in Richmond / Rosenberg prepare you for the University of Houston?

MELLON: I think we were on the right track. When I got to high school, we had some pretty good teachers. Irma Drew Hutchinson was the math teacher, and she was very, very good, very strong in math. We had a Spanish teacher by the name of Mrs. Roach, who was very good. We had an English teacher by the name of Bess Campbell, who was tops. If you didn't understand something, they worked with you after-hours. If you needed a little more help, you could get it very easily. I think they did a real nice job.

WARE: Were you particularly studious?

MELLON: I was probably average. I got involved in photography. Our science teacher was Henry Althause. Through him I got involved in photography. I started off in the eighth or ninth grade. We had a darkroom at the new high school but we were doing photography in the old high school in Rosenberg where that shopping center, 99 Cents shopping center is now. That is where the old Rosenberg High School used to be.



*Young Harry Mellon, ca. 1947, learning photography, his life-long avocation.*

WARE: Right there on 90A

MELLON: Yes, and that is where the football field used to be. If you want to go to the Richmond High School where Jane Long School is to the right, sort of west of it, that used to be the old high school, and the other part used to be the football field before we had Jane Long Elementary..

WARE: Henry Alhause taught you photography?

MELLON: He taught me photography and he taught me science.

WARE: Did he have a photography studio?

MELLON: No, he didn't have a photography studio, but he knew the chemistry of photography. We had a darkroom in the new high school for photography. I worked on the annual. I ended up going to the University of Houston. I ended up having a studio. I was the only photographer in Richmond, and Jerry Humpola was the only photographer in Rosenberg. We took probably ninety percent of the pictures of the Richmond/Rosenberg area.

WARE: Tell me how you came to have a photography studio.

MELLON: It came about through high school. Henry Althause was teaching us science, and they had that darkroom there. I started learning photography. I was fascinated with it. It was mostly science. We had a lab, and he taught us how to make beer. We made gallons of beer and kept it in the refrigerator. When we came back, half of it was gone. The only way we could figure out who got that beer was some of the students. They were sort of tipsy walking down the, well that guy got some of our beer.

WARE: The school itself owned cameras? What kind of cameras were they?

MELLON: The school owned the cameras. I think we had 4x5 speed graphics. We took the football pictures. Then, many times, I got to shoot down on the field. You climbed the telephone post, and there was a perch up there. You put your camera up there and shot down at the field. That is how we did it in those days.

WARE: Goodness, with sheet film?

MELLON: Sheet film, 4x 5 sheet film.

WARE: That is not very portable, is it?

MELLON: No, it is not. You had to take your film holders, and then as time progressed, a film pack came out. Someday I will bring my camera and I'll show it to you. My film pack held 12 sheets in one pack. You pull the tab and pull it around. The film pack wasn't as stiff as cut film. You know you had different kinds of film from PlusX to X to Super Double X to Tri X film. They had notches on the corner so you knew which one you were putting into the holder.

WARE: Depending on how much light you had to shoot with, right, and how fine grained you wanted it?

MELLON: That's right. The Plus X was very fine grained. Super Double X was very fast. Tri X was very fast.

WARE: So as a 14 year old, you became interested in photography?

MELLON: That sounds about right, it was in the ninth grade.

WARE: Then you actually leased space for a photography studio?

MELLON: No, daddy allowed me to take part of the garage when we lived in Richmond and make it into a darkroom. I still tell this story. Pete Webb lived in Rosenberg. He was one of the top refrigeration people. He served most of the stores to keep the deep freeze and coolers working. Daddy always used him to service the stuff at our store. I had the darkroom, and Super Value opened the store where Furniture World used to in Rosenberg.

The Simmons' were Super Value. They bought all this refrigeration from Pete. He asked me to go take pictures of it since I was in photography. So, I took pictures of all the beautiful equipment that they put in there. I guess he really appreciated it. He saw where I was trying to develop the pictures, and it was hot. "You need a little air conditioner or something in here." I said, "There is no way I can buy an air conditioner." Air conditioners were really in their infancy. He had a used one that he brought over and put into my darkroom, a real antique, but it worked! One day it went out. I called Pete Webb and said, "Mr. Webb my air conditioner...I really need...I just shot a wedding. It is HOT this summer. I need to get these out for the newspaper."

Within an hour, he was there, and he fixed it. Daddy's big cooler went out that morning, and daddy had called him. He said. "I'll get to it as soon as I can." So, daddy came home for lunch, and Pete Webb was fixing my air conditioner! "Pete what are you doing here; I've got meat in that cooler going to rot, and you're over here fixing my son's air conditioner for his pictures!!" Pete said, "Well Sam, I'm going to get to it just as soon as I can." My daddy said, "Well the store is more important than my son's darkroom!"

WARE: I can't imagine having to develop film in a darkroom without air conditioning.

MELLON: Well, you had to do it. You had to do what you did. We did lots of pictures. In those days, they went to the Texas Coaster or the one in Rosenberg. At that time, we had another newspaper called The Fort Bend Reporter that was owned by Mr. A. M. Coin. We put out a lot of pictures of weddings because there were only two photographers to take all the weddings in Fort Bend County. I can tell you a little story about the photography and taking wedding pictures if you want.

WARE: Yes, yes

MELLON: There is one in particular. These weddings were all denominations. But when you went to a Catholic wedding, like in Needville, it was an all-day affair. It wasn't a one-hour deal. You started off with the Mass in the morning. Then they had lunch at the American Legion Hall. Then you came back at night for the wedding march. It was an all-day affair, but in between you developed the pictures so you had them ready for the Monday morning paper. I had one that I believe was in Orchard.

WARE: Orchard in is on 90A towards San Antonio?

MELLON: Right. I had finished one in Needville, but I was trying to line up a group shot after the wedding. This was a Catholic wedding in Orchard. I was lining up the bride and the groom, and I wanted to get the minister in there. Of course, in the Catholic Church it was Father So-and-so. I had taken a wedding EARLIER, and a Baptist wedding with Brother So-and-so. I said, "Brother So-and-so, would you mind moving to your left?" He said, "Young man my name is not brother. My name is Father So-and-so." I said, "I am so sorry." He was very serious. I lined him up and I took two or three shots, and he got out of line again. I tried to get him back, and of course, my mind was on photography. I said, "Brother So-and-so, would you…" And I never will forget how he really dressed me down. "MY NAME IS NOT BROTHER. MY NAME IS FATHER SO-AND—SO!!" I was just as red as I could be. Everybody else was laughing. They thought it was funny.

These weddings also took the first pictures of the Catholic Church over here on the west end of Rosenberg. They held a dedication of that church way back there.

WARE: Have you retained all of your negatives?

MELLON: Most of the negatives I've retained.

WARE: So you became interested in photography at 13 or 14? By the time you were in high school you are shooting weddings?

MELLON: All this is in high school. After I got out of the university, Uncle Sam said, "Hey we need you now for a couple of years." So, I went into the Army. I was hoping to go to Eastman Kodak for training in photography. But when I went through the school, they said you already have too much education in photography. We are going to send you right into one of the photography posts. Well, I had gotten my degree in business, but I was within 12 hours of a Bachelor of Science in photography. I was going into industrial photography. I took all that at the University of Houston. I was very fortunate. Professor Martha Pike taught me portraits. She was the main person at Gidding's Photography. Mr. Farris was in commercial photography and industrial photography and showed me everything in commercial. Charles Smith was in commercial photography and taught me everything about science, aberration of lenses and the whole nine yards. In those days, we had lots of theory in photography.

When I got to the military, I took basic training at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. I ended up assigned to Fort Huachuca, which was the U. S. Army atomic proving grounds. All the generals came to that post because it was a proving ground for the Nike missile. I photographed the Nike missile.

I was there when we developed drone airplanes, planes without pilots in them. We were required to take care of the cameras that went into the belly of the drone. When I was there, it was not a very sophisticated robot flying machine like it is today. It's mission was to fly over the enemy territory and take photographs. We'd bring it back, and then we had readers that read all the negatives to see what was out there. It had a 70mm lens like you use in the movie theater, same type of film.

From there they put me on flight pay so that I could go flying and take pictures over the earth. They built a radar installation at Yuma. I didn't know what it was for. I had to photograph that from the foundation all the way up. The Army was very particular, always having pictures of everything. I had a top secret security clearance. It wasn't until I was out of the service that I saw on television space shots flying over the Yuma test station. There was the big antenna that we photographed all the way through. I had no idea what I was doing. It was for the space shots that were to come.

WARE: Now you say that you got flight pay. Were you an actual pilot?

MELLON: No, they flew me up, and I was the photographer. I got out about '61. It was two years. I graduated in '58, so I went in at the end of '58. All the time I was stationed in Fort Huachuca, Arizona, I was in photography because it was the Army electronic proving ground.

WARE: When you came home, you went back to Richmond/Rosenberg correct?

MELLON: Right, and daddy was still on my back about not getting into photography. When I got back, I ended up in the building business. I started K&M Home Builders. We still have that corporation. It is over 50 years old. When I graduated college, daddy was still on my back, so I got my real estate broker's license. I was one of the youngest realtors. About two years ago, the state sent me a certificate showing that I'm over 50 years as a continuous Texas real estate broker. I am number 62 in the state of Texas for over 50 years in the real estate business.

WARE: Wow, that's great.

MELLON: I do want to talk about my mother. She helped dad all the way. Sometimes I really felt that she was the brains of the business. She could spell even though she only went to the eighth grade, if I'm not mistaken. She learned phonics, and she could spell just about about anything. The only way I could spell was to memorize. You took a group, and you memorized that list. Mother says, "You'd never do good that way, you need to listen to the word and spell it with phonics."

*Harry's mother, Cecile Seltzer Mellon, was born in Chancelerkof, Poland. She worked in the family store until her husband died and then became very active in Real Estate circles.*

Mother decided to get involved in real estate. In those days, not only did we do grocery business, but we knew all the farmers because we bought the cattle from them. We went to the A. P. George estate where they raised their own cattle. We bought it from them. There were also different people in parts of Fort Bend County who had their own farms and they came in the store. They'd say, "Sam can you sell my farm, or can you sell five acres off my farm?" So, you got involved in real estate. In those days all you did was write the state for a license. That is all you had to do. That is why they wanted me to become a broker not a salesman.

Mother kept on it, on it. She was the one that organized the Fort Bend Board of Realtors. We started out with seven chartered people. We met at Bill Williams' Restaurant across the river past Pier 37, where they have all that dirt piled up. That was Bill Williams' Restaurant. They had a room that was called the Jaybird Room. Now if you go back in history, you will see a monument near Richmond City Hall of the Jaybirds and the Woodpeckers. They had a political fight in downtown Richmond. There is a book about the Jaybirds and the Woodpeckers. I get asked about that every time I go out of town. Someone says, "Oh you are from Richmond, tell me about the Jaybirds and the Woodpeckers."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Jaybird–Woodpecker War (1888–89) was a feud between two United States Democratic Party factions fighting for political control of Fort Bend County, Texas, in the southeast part of the state. The Woodpeckers (many of whom had been Republican during Reconstruction) included a number of whites and virtually the entire African-American population of the county. The Woodpeckers had controlled the county government by winning elections since the Reconstruction Era. The Jaybird faction, which included a majority of the white population in the county, wanted to oust blacks and their white allies from the county administration. Murders were committed against persons in each faction in 1888 and 1889.

On August 16, 1889, a gunfight broke out at the county courthouse, in which four persons were killed, including the sheriff. The Jaybirds won the fight and seized control of the county government soon afterward, with the collaboration of Governor Lawrence Sullivan Ross, who established martial law in the county. The effects of the Post-Reconstruction feud echoed in local politics for decades. The Jaybirds effectively disfranchised the African Americans in the county by using a "whites-only" ballot in preliminary party voting from 1889 until 1953, when the United States Supreme Court ruled that this was unconstitutional. --Wikepedia

Mother was instrumental in organizing the Fort Bend Board of Realtors. We had it here in Richmond, but it was for all of Fort Bend County. At the time, we got our charter to operate from the state. We had to pick how big of an area we wanted. Of course, mother wanted the whole area of Fort Bend County. She managed to get it all the way up to Highway 6 in Sugar Land. She wanted it farther, but Houston was fighting us a little bit. They said how about the dividing line being Highway 6, which she did.

We had Julius McCordia, don't ask me how to spell it. He was on the National Association of Realtors. He came out, and we'd meet. Of course, in those days, we didn't have a lot of members. K. E. Antone was on the Houston board. He came out and helped us. He said, "You have got to keep meeting, keep meeting." Well, mother became president and director and state director. We had the thing built up to 1,200 real estate members. Then they finally joined the Houston Board.

WARE: You mother is Cecile?

MELLON: Cecile Mellon, A. K. Jacobs was on there.

WARE: That's good. Your mother was an immigrant from Poland?

MELLON: That's right.

WARE: Did your mother speak with an accent?

MELLON: My mother was Jewish, but she never had an accent. They never talked Jewish around the children. They wanted us to learn English. Now when my mom and dad wanted to say something between them then… When I say Jewish, I am really talking about speaking Hebrew or Yiddish. They spoke Yiddish. They did not know Hebrew. Only the people that really went to or came from Israel spoke Hebrew. It was always a mixed language; German and so forth mixed together.

Now my grandfather, I'll bring him into the picture. He lived in Houston. That is mother's dad. He came to the store every Saturday. He drove down here from Houston. He was a tailor, but he came from the old country, Poland. He spoke seven languages. He came up to the front of the store during Saturday and greeted every one of the people that came in their native tongue. If there was a German, he spoke German. If it was Bohemian, he spoke Bohemian to them. If it was Dutch, it was Spanish, he spoke with them. Being a tailor in Houston, he had different people that bought suits, and he could communicate. He came out here on a Saturday and stand in the front of the store, and he just loved it. People coming into the store stayed there a half an hour talking to him.

WARE: Because they could talk to someone that understood them. Now what was your maternal grandfather's name?

MELLON: Isaac Seltzer

WARE: What was his wife's name?

MELLON: Rebecca. We did not know her because she died. I don't know whether she died here in the United States or in Europe. I'm not really sure. I never did meet her.

WARE: Did your mother have brothers and sisters?

MELLON: That is an interesting story. Mother had three siblings. There was Cecile, Rose Ginsberg and Bessie Sklar. Rose Ginsberg married Joe Ginsberg, and they had the dry good store in Rosenberg. Bessie was a beauty operator, and she remained in Houston. All these people have died now. Rose was the oldest, and she died at an early age from cancer.

WARE: Your grandfather as greeter is fascinating to me. They didn't pay him to do that?

MELLON: No, he came down here. He was off on Saturday and Sunday. He sort of watched the store so nobody stole out the front door. But he loved coming down here and being a greeter.

WARE: Did he ever re-marry?

MELLON: No.

WARE: I interrupted you. You were telling me about your mother and the board of realtors. You told me, how they kind of got interested in it. Did that become your mother's primary livelihood after a while?

MELLON: Yes, once they got rid of the store, we carried on Mellon Real Estate. They had Mellon Real Estate when they had the grocery store. But after daddy died, she carried on. She was a very, very smart lady. MANY business people in Fort Bend County would seek out her knowledge. One thing we all gave her credit for, even other people, was that she had a feel of the economy. She could tell you three or four years ahead of time what you should be doing. She was brought up during The Depression. I'm a Depression baby. She could tell you when you needed to buy real estate. Sidney and I ended up buying a lot of real estate at the right time. She had a feeling for the right the time to buy. We bought a lot of real estate in 1986 when we had a terrific recession. At one time she owned about 50 houses.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Great Depression was the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world, beginning in the United States, lasting from 1929 to 1939. It began after the stock market crash of October 1929, which sent Wall Street into a panic and wiped out millions of investors. --*courtesy Wikipedia*

WARE: It is amazing to me to hear this story because historically your mother should have just been a housewife.

MELLON: That's right! She had the most commonsense approach to things. It was just natural to her.

WARE: In the grocery business who was the boss?

MELLON: Well, daddy liked to think he was the boss, but I really think it was my mother. Daddy was a Samaritan. He liked to give things away. Mother had the two and two is four math. She said, "No use carrying that item; it is not making any money. We need to get rid of it, and put something else on the shelf." Suppliers/vendors fought for shelf space. Like the bread rack, when you go in to buy a loaf of bread do you really go to buy Mrs. Baird's, or do you just reach over there and get the most convenient loaf?

The vendors fought for the shelf rack right on the corner because when you walk up there, you are just going to reach over there. You had Fair Maid bread, Mrs. Baird's bread, and Holsten bread. The ones that were farther back, people didn't pick up unless they really wanted that particular bread. Mother always asked, "Why are we handling that." Canned goods as a rule, didn't sell very well, olives, things like that. You don't sell that every day. She said, "Well, we can't have three different makes of olives. We'll have one or two and that's it." But the vendors tried to put every brand of olives up there. She was very good on figures.

WARE: She was in her nineties when she died.

MELLON: I think she was going to be 92 or 93 when she passed.

WARE: What year did she die?

MELLON: Five years ago, Sidney will have that.

WARE: Sidney is quite a bit younger than you.

MELLON: He is 15 years younger than I am. Rochelle is in between. Rochelle is five years younger.

*Harry Mellon, right, taking a break from butchering and grocery sales, for a snowball fight, ca, 1952*

WARE: So Sidney was a surprise?

MELLON: I don't think he was a surprise, but who knows back then.

WARE: Just to review… When you were a kid you delivered the groceries. Then you became interested in photography. You did some of the butchering. Who taught you the butchering?

MELLON: The two butchers that were there, Emmett Love and Curtis Gaston.

WARE: How old were you when you started butchering?

MELLON: Probably about ten or eleven. There are some pictures somewhere where I had the apron on and everything. I can tell you things that I don't know if you want to record it. I mean, how we used to kill chickens.

WARE: That's okay, it was just something that was done historically. Share some of that with me. Did you wring the chicken's neck?

MELLON: Yes, ma'm, we did. I went out back. We had a fifty-gallon barrel with the top cut out. They taught me how to take the chicken by the neck and wring it off. You did it perfect when the chicken body landed in the barrel and threw the head and the beak away. Sometimes I missed it and the chicken walked away without a head. They kidded me, you know, and said, "You didn't aim it very good." You gotta know how many times you are going to go around because one time it goes around, it is going to come off.

WARE: Seriously? You swirled the chicken by the head, and then you hit it on the side of the barrel so that it fell in the barrel? You did that every time somebody wanted a chicken?

MELLON: No, no, we butchered ten or 15 chickens ahead of time. We dipped them in hot water; feathers came off. Then we took out the gizzard. You had to be very careful because there is a little something in there that could leave a bad taste in the chicken. You want to get that out. Today a person comes in and all that's done. We tried to sell the chicken as a whole, but Mrs. Jones came in and said, "No, I want you to cut it up." You've got to know how to cut it up, get right where the joints are and cut up the chicken. Those are just some of the things we did. We had a fish case and chicken, poultry in a bed of ice. We sold lots of fish and a lot of poultry. A lot of those fish came out of the A. P. George Lake. Mr. Han did the fishing. He went to the merchants and brought those fish. A lot of them were live fish when we got them.

WARE: Did you clean the fish before you sold them or sell them whole?

MELLON: No, we'd clean them.

WARE: You cleaned all the poultry before you sold it?

MELLON: Right, just like catfish, sometimes we had catfish. They were live. You had to take a straw and stick right over here.

WARE: Between their eyes?

MELLON: Where their brain is. It's farm life, but I have three children and seven grandchildren now. For me to try to explain all that to them is useless, they can't relate to it. You can relate to it because you were brought up with it.

WARE: Did you have turkeys?

MELLON: We had some turkeys. We didn't sell many there. We sold them live, and we also sold...this will be interesting. A lady came in and, of course, I told you refrigeration was minimum. She bought two live chickens. The reason she bought live chickens was that she didn't know when she was going to eat those chickens. So she took them home and kept those live chickens until she was ready to kill them, and eat them. So, she also bought TWO. Do you know why they bought two? You've got to remember they didn't have transportation. A lot of them lived across the tracks from where the store was. They walked home, didn't have transportation.

WARE: One in each hand?

MELLON: So the way we did it, we took a piece of twine and we tied the leg of a chicken to the other leg of the chicken and then put it over their shoulders, and the chicken hung down. So their clothes wouldn't get messed up, we took a brown paper bag, and go over and poked a little hole in the bag where the chicken's head came out so it wouldn't suffocate and tie around the leg over here and the same thing on the other. Then they'd walk home with a chicken on the front and a chicken on the back, walking home.

On the other hand, they had a gallon of coal oil. Coal oil is kerosene. They bought their gallon from vinegar that was empty, and we filled it full of coal oil. They always lost their cap, no cap on it. So, we took a used corncob and stuck it in. Sometimes they had a gallon or a can, but they didn't have the top. We took a little red potato and stick on the...

WARE: So all the gas wouldn't come out?

MELLON: Right, and that's how they took the chickens on this side and hole a little...

WARE: ...and the coal oil on the other?

MELLON: I poured many gallons of coal oil.

WARE: Did you had a little pump of some kind.

MELLON: We had a tank that held 50 gallons of coal oil in the back of the store. I'd do that all day long, fill those things up.

WARE: I am a little lost because how do you cook with coal oil?

MELLON: They had stoves that filled up and they put coal oil in them.

WARE: They had a little tank on the side that they filled up?

MELLON: Well, it is underneath. They filled it up. You have got to understand, we had all types of people from minimum poverty on up to A. P. George. Some of them really didn't have any lights. They had coal oil lanterns at home that they filled up with coal oil, that had the wick. We sold the wicks and the deal was that you turned the wick up if you wanted it brighter. Do you know what I am talking about?

WARE: Yes, I do, like an oil lamp type of thing. You were talking about being a real estate broker.

MELLON: In real estate, what I learned from daddy is that every piece of real estate has its use. We were always taught to have lots of frontage for real estate. You never want something real narrow on the highway, and then have this large piece of tract land with no narrow frontage. I always looked at things, and I never forget Sidney Beard, a Realtor in Richmond. He came in one day, and told me, "I have a contract right out here by Foster School. You go down FM 723 and take FM 359, and as you go around the bend where the Mullers live over there, there's a Jewish camp. It didn't have very much frontage. It is 107 acres. They are going to buy that." I said, "Sidney, why are they buying that; it has no frontage? It is a small entrance to get to 100 acres in the back?" He says, "Well you never know why people want something, but they are going to buy it." I said, "Well, they are sure making a mistake because there is no frontage to it." Well, then I found out later they didn't want any frontage. They didn't want to be seen on the highway. They just wanted a nice entrance. They wanted a camp for the kids in the back, but they didn't want everybody driving by.

I LEARNED that every piece of land has some use. Daddy had an acre or two in Arcola. Somebody couldn't pay their bill or something, and he took it over. He could NEVER get rid of it. He said, "I don't know what to do with that land!" It had a little creek that went right through the middle of it. You couldn't use it for anything because it was natural drainage for this little creek. It was long and narrow, and the creek was parallel. One of the farmers that lived out there asked my dad, "Sam, could I buy that?" My dad's ears popped up, and he said, "Well, certainly! What do you want to give for it?" They came up with some kind of price. Daddy was SO happy! He told my mother, "Finally got rid of that piece of land." "What in the world is that guy going to use that for? It's worthless, water keeps going through it."

A year or two later Daddy said, "Let's take a ride on Sunday and go out and see what the farmer did with that land." So, we went out there, and as we got closer we saw all this movement on this piece of land. We couldn't figure out what it was until we got up on it. What he did was dam up part of that creek. It was only about six to eight inches deep, and it was full of pigs. In the summertime pigs, like to waddle in water.

WARE: They have to have a wallow.

MELLON: They have to. And here he had a pig farm. It was perfect with natural water going through the creek. Daddy said right then, "Son, every piece of land has a use. You just have to figure out what the use is."

WARE: I have to tell you what I thought when you were talking about the butchery. Your dad had a plan in place, but he applied it to cattle. He used every piece of that cattle.

MELLON: Oh yeah, oh yeah. We made sausage. I used to make the sausage and links. You had pork, which you put with the tallow to make beef, to make different types of sausage. We had a little smokehouse. We'd smoke it out back.

WARE: You had a smokehouse at the store?

MELLON: At the store. Oh yeah, dad did a little of everything. It was an I. G. A. store—Independent Grocers Association. They put one in each town. He had the one in Rosenberg and the one in Richmond.

WARE: Thank you so much for this interview, and for sharing your photos.

Interview Ends