

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Helen DeRegil**

Interview Date: 01/30/2010

Interviewer: Flo Cook

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: St. Theresa's Catholic Church



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Transcript

COOK: Hi Helen. My name is Flo Cook and today I am interviewing you Helen DeRegil, here at St. Theresa's Catholic Church in Sugar Land on January 30, 2010. The interview is for the Fort Bend Historical Commission Oral History Committee. Let's start with some basis biological information. When and where were you born?

DEREGIL: I was born in Sugar Land out in the country on Stilies Lane, which is now Dairy Ashford.

COOK: Oh!

DEREGIL: And uh that was 19...was 1925.

COOK: And were you born at home or in a hospital?

DEREGIL: I think at home.

COOK: At home.

DEREGIL: Yeah.

COOK: Was there a doctor there or...

DEREGIL: You know I don't know.

COOK: Don't know if there was a midwife.

DEREGIL: I imagine was a midwife.

COOK: Okay, how about your siblings?

DEREGIL: I had an older sister and brother, and a younger brother. And we were all born...no, my, my older brother was born in Gordon, Texas. And my sister and my younger brother were born in Sugar Land.

COOK: Okay, were they also born at home?

DEREGIL: Yes.

COOK: Okay. Were your parents the first in your family to live in Sugar Land.

DEREGIL: Yes.

COOK: Okay, so your parents worked for Imperial Sugar?

DEREGIL: Well, father did farming for a while and then he worked for the sugar company.

COOK: Do you know what brought your parents uh to Sugar Land?

DEREGIL: Well, I don't know.

COOK: Perhaps heard there was work or...

DEREGIL: Probably so and [there was] a sister and a brother-in-law that lived in Sugar Land. So I imagine that helped bring them here.

COOK: Okay. Do you know when that was when they came to Sugar Land?

DEREGIL: Probably in around 1918, 1919 something like that.

COOK: Okay. Tell me about your parents working at Imperial.

DEREGIL: Uh, my father worked uh...oh gosh, I don't know uh...I don't know what he did. I really don't. My mother worked in the packing department.

COOK: Okay. Do you remember any stories they would tell about their days at work?

DEREGIL: No.

COOK: Did they ever compare Imperial Sugar Land to other places...other places to work...you remember them doing that? How about your childhood impressions of the refinery? Do you remember the Imperial Sugar refinery as a child?

DEREGIL: Yes, I do. I know when we had storms we'd go there. (chuckles)

COOK: Oh!

DEREGIL: We'd go there to protect ourselves.

COOK: Wonderful!

DEREGIL: They'd open the doors for everybody and we'd go there.

COOK: Wonderful.

DEREGIL: And if we wanted to go, we went if we didn't we stay home.

COOK: So in emergency situations...

DEREGIL: Yeah, it was open for the public to go in out of the bad weather.

COOK: What, what do you remember about the town of Sugar Land when you were young and growing up?

DEREGIL: It was a good town. (chuckles) Everybody knew everybody. And when you walked down the street or where ever you knew the person. You'd speak. You'd stop and talk and you'd go on about your business.

COOK: Now where would you usually go when you went to Sugar Land, went to town?

DEREGIL: Well, to the grocery store, the department store, the feed store, the drugstore. That was all together, in one building.

COOK: So was that the only building in town?

DEREGIL: Well they had a post office and they had a meat market. ... best I can remember.

COOK: Um hum.

DEREGIL: It was all closed in.

COOK: Where did you go for fun?

DEREGIL: For fun? (laughter) At home we played baseball or whatever (laughing).

COOK: Good

DEREGIL: There was nothing here for fun in those days.

COOK: No restaurants or uh...

COOK: You graduated from Sugar Land High School in 1943.

DEREGIL: Yes.

COOK: Tell me about going to school in Sugar Land.

DEREGIL: Oh, it was great. It was a nice school and the teachers were good. And the teachers helped when you couldn't learn [for] yourself they would help you.

COOK: Wonderful.

DEREGIL: Yep.

COOK: Uh, was there just one grade in each room?

DEREGIL: Just one grade.

COOK: One grade in each room.

DEREGIL: Um hum.

COOK: Do you remember how many children were in each classroom?

DEREGIL: Oh probably between twenty and thirty something like that. Or maybe less, depends on the age of the child.

COOK: Now how was your schooling different from your older sister Elsie's?

DEREGIL: There was no difference.

COOK: Now your older brothers was Alvin? And your younger brother was Gilbert? Was your schooling different from theirs?

DEREGIL: No, it wasn't...it was no different. We all learned the same things, you know.

COOK: Tell me something about your classmates. Just think back, put yourself back in school and tell me about your classmates.

DEREGIL: Well, they were all good. Good kids. We all got along together. And there was no bickering or anything like that.

COOK: Did you maintain some of those friendships? The class that you were in did they...did you usually go through each grade together?

DEREGIL: Yes.

COOK: So you knew each other well?

DEREGIL: Yes we did.

COOK: Do you know how many graduated in your class?

DEREGIL: About twenty-four.

COOK: Tell me about some of your teachers. Who was your favorite teacher?

DEREGIL: My favorite was Mrs. Manning, our math teacher. And she was the principal of the school. And she was a good teacher, very good.

COOK: What made her a good teacher?

DEREGIL: Well, she taught good. And if you didn't understand something she would explain it to you.

COOK: Wonderful.

DEREGIL: Yes, she would. She was very good.

COOK: Now tell me about your worst teacher.

DEREGIL: There was no worst teacher. (laughter)

COOK: Wonderful they were all good. Helen, you lost your brother, Alvin, in World War II?

DEREGIL: Yes I did.

COOK: Tell me about him and some of the other Sugar Land boys that we lost in the war.

DEREGIL: (pause) Well it was him (pause) and a boy by the name of Starr. Gosh, I can't remember. There's a plaque over in the park with their names. I can't remember any others because that was back in 1944, '45, something like that.

COOK: Now did most of the local boys serve?

DEREGIL: Uh, probably so. He [brother] had, he had two friends that went into the service. He had two friends that he run around with went in but they didn't die. They came home.

COOK: Did any of the females serve in World War II that you...any friends, girlfriends?

DEREGIL: No. There was one lady that was a nurse. I think she was in the Army or service. Her name is Gandy now, but I can't think of her maiden name. I think it was Douglas.

COOK: How did the town react to the service and the loss of our local boys?

DEREGIL: I don't know. I don't think they did anything extra for them.

COOK: Do you remember any parades when they came home?

DEREGIL: No, they didn't have parades or nothing like that. We just, the government brought my brother home. They brought a coffin home but I don't know if he was in it or not. And that we had uh services for him in the church. Buried him in the Rosenberg cemetery. And that's it!

COOK: Okay. Were you every employed in the Sugar Land area?

DEREGIL: Yes, during my senior and my junior year I worked in summer months at the refinery, in the packing department and packed sugar. I was working beside my mother sometimes. And we had fun. (giggles) It was a lot of fun working there. And the salary was fifty cents an hour, which was probably good in those days.

COOK: Yes!

DEREGIL: So, I had a lot of money (laughs).

COOK: Wow! (laughter) So did you...how about your your husband?

DEREGIL: He was in the Navy for six years.

COOK: In World War II?

DEREGIL: Yes. And when he got out of the service...we lived in Galveston. He finished up in Galveston. While we were there I worked for the National American Insurance Company. And when he got out of the service and we moved to Houston. And he went to work. And then he was employed with some oil companies and we traveled from town to town working for these oil companies. He died in 1960.

COOK: Aw.

DEREGIL: So...

COOK: Well, during your childhood where in Sugar Land did you live?

DEREGIL: Lived out on Stiles Lane for quite a few years. And then when my dad quit farming to go to work for the Imperial Sugar Company, he sold all the farm equipment and animals and everything. And he last year my younger brother finished up the crops and then we moved into a house which is the Eldridge Home. There was a garage apartment at one end of that building. It's gone now.

COOK: Um hum, now where is that located today?

DEREGIL: On Eldridge Street [at Lakeview]

COOK: Okay, so you lived in a garage apartment behind it.

DEREGIL: Yes, and we lived there...it was connected to the building, to the house. We lived there for I don't know how many years, a few years anyway and the friends who had the big part. And in '43 when I graduated, I think I was still living there. And then I went to see Mr. Bob Shepherd to see if we couldn't get a home in town, and he rented us a house on Fourth Street. So then we lived there for a while. And then when they'd started selling the homes my mother, my dad was already gone, and brother bought this property on South Belknap. Built a home and that's where I'm living now.

COOK: Now you said that you had moved to Galveston when your husband returned from the Navy. Were there any other moves that you had before you came back to Sugar Land?

DEREGIL: Oh yeah. We lived in Lyford, Texas, Raymondville, Corpus Christi. And then from Corpus we went to Conroe. From Conroe we went to Stafford. From Stafford I moved to Sugar Land. After my husband died I moved back to Sugar Land. He was with the oil company and they moved him.

COOK: Okay, all right. What's your very favorite memory of growing up in Sugar Land?

DEREGIL: My favorite memory (chuckling) was when we rode a horse to school. My oldest sister rode a horse named Ribbon. My brother and I rode a horse named Doc. There was no bus transportation out where we lived so we had get to school some ways so we rode a horse.

COOK: Um hum.

DEREGIL: And my brother and I were on this horse and it had rained real bad and the dirt was muddy and the horse slipped. And we got dirty. (laughter) So we went home to clean up and change. We stayed home from school! We thought that was fun. (laughter)

COOK: Yes (laughing)

DEREGIL: And then next time it rained well we were on this horse going to school my brother said, "You want skip school today?" (laughter) I said, "Sure." So the horse slipped again, but when we got home to clean up my parents cleaned us up and sent us back to school. (laughter) That was funny. (laughter)

COOK: It was. (laughter) So it was worth the spill, huh?

DEREGIL: Yes, it was.

COOK: Think back now, Helen ...tell me what your least favorite memory living in Sugar Land.

DEREGIL: Oh, when they took the uh drugstore away from us. When they took the beauty shop away from us we had nothing. We just had absolutely nothing. We had to find a place to go to get our hair done.

COOK: Well now who took this away?

DEREGIL: The Imperial Sugar Company did. They, they needed that space for whatever they wanted for. But they didn't use it. It was empty for a long time after that, so we could have just stayed with that beauty shop, you know.

COOK: So there was actually a beauty shop inside of the ...

DEREGIL: Of the building. And they took the grocery store away, so it was hard for us to get around then.

COOK: So can you describe what the town looked like? Besides Imperial Sugar were there any other buildings that made up the town?

DEREGIL: Well, we had a Western Auto. They did away with that. They did away with our theatre. They just thought they thought they were gonna be real smart and move everything over to the First Colony. And why they named [it] First Colony I don't know, that's an ugly name for that part of the town. And that's what they think Sugar Land is now, but it's not, it's this part that's Sugar Land (laughing) to me.

COOK: Now your husband worked took you away from Sugar Land worked for a few years.

DEREGIL: Yes.

COOK: Tell me how did you and your husband meet.

DEREGIL: Well he, he was in the Navy. He came home on leave and I met him when he was home.

COOK: Now what is his name?

DEREGIL: His name was Solomon, Joseph Solomon.

COOK: Joseph Solomon. Okay, so he was home on leave from the Navy?

DEREGIL: Yes, and we got married! (chuckles)

COOK: So where did you meet him? Did someone introduce you?

DEREGIL: Yeah, his brother. His brother and his wife introduced us so we, we met at the local drugstore.

COOK: You met at the drugstore? Did you have a soda together?

DEREGIL: Oh yeah.

COOK: So you fell in love?

DEREGIL: Yes.

COOK: Tell me about the changes that you saw when you moved back to Sugar Land after being with him in Galveston. You did not come back to Sugar Land for quite a while. Correct?

DEREGIL: Well there was a period about ten years I think that we lived in the valley for maybe a couple years and then went to Corpus and lived there seven years. Everything was like it was until they start taking the drugstore away from us and the beauty shop and the Western Auto store. And it all disappeared. And everything went over across Highway 6. All that stood there was a refinery (laughs). And they had a cafeteria [which] couldn't make it so they moved away. So we just I don't know what we did then, really.

COOK: Let's go a little bit beyond that point of when you first came back. How did Sugar Land begin to change?

DEREGIL: Well, I went to work for uh WKM, which was located in Missouri City. When I first started with them I was in the personnel department. And then I was transferred over to engineering, and then to quality assurance, and then I went back to engineering. I was a technical writer. And finally after thirty-three years, or thirty-one years, or whatever it was, they retired me. (laughter)

COOK: What did you family do for recreation, during your childhood?

DEREGIL: Well, my parents played dominoes and visited from the neighbors.

COOK: How about the County Fair? Did you go to that?

DEREGIL: Uhhh. No!

COOK: Didn't go to the County Fair. Do you remember racial segregation in Sugar Land?

DEREGIL: Oh, I only know only that the black people had the Quarters to live in, so did the Spanish people. And then the Spanish people started coming in with us to school. But the blacks never did when I was there.

COOK: Were there many blacks that worked at Imperial Sugar?

DEREGIL: There were quite a few. Everybody got along okay.

COOK: Imperial Sugar had a cafeteria. Were the blacks allowed to eat in there?

DEREGIL: I don't think so. I didn't see any in there.

COOK: But the Hispanic people were?

DEREGIL: Probably so.

COOK: The schools were also segregated? Wasn't there a black school?

DEREGIL: Yeah, M. R. Wood, was for the blacks. And then the Spanish people moved over and came to school with us. They were considered white people.

COOK: I know you were born in Sugar Land. You told me that you were born at home. Do you ever remember any general or emergency medical care here? Did you ever see an accident or someone very ill?

DEREGIL: Well, when I was ten years old I was sick, almost died. I had double pneumonia.

COOK: And what happened? Did doctors come to your house or were you taken to the hospital?

DEREGIL: I was taken to the hospital. Doctor [Carlos] Slaughter was my doctor, and he was a very good doctor. I don't know how he pulled me through this, but he did! And I spent half a year out of school, which I had to re-make that year. I got sick in January and I was out of school the rest of the year. That was during my fifth grade. And I had to re-do fifth grade again.

COOK: What did the hospital look like?

DEREGIL: It was clean. It was nice. They had good nurses. They had good doctors. Of course my doctor...I loved that doctor very much!

COOK: Right.

DEREGIL: Yeah. And he always called me Sis (laughs).

COOK: Aw. Were there doctors' offices there in the hospital?

DEREGIL: No, he had an office above the drugstore.

COOK: Now was the drugstore right by Imperial Sugar?

DEREGIL: It was. And then they built a clinic for him. And it was on the corner of, gosh I don't know what that street's name is, but the clinic is not there anymore. [Wood and Lakeview]

COOK: Okay were there ambulances in...

DEREGIL: I don't know. I don't think so.

COOK: Tell me about shopping in Sugar Land.

DEREGIL: It was good. (chuckles) We had one general mercantile general store and we bought our clothes there. It consisted of everything, under clothes, shoes, whatever!

COOK: Is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to add?

DEREGIL: No. (chuckling)

COOK: Well you have done a wonderful job and so this concludes our interview today. Thank you so much, what a pleasure it was to talk with you, Helen.

DEREGIL: Well thank you.