

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Jim Gammill**

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Interviewer: Olga Barr

Transcriber: Bryan McAuley

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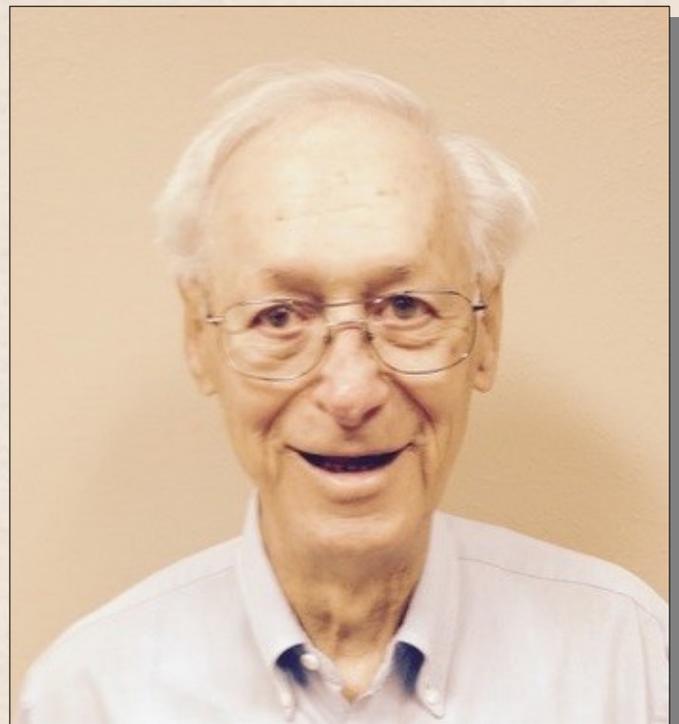
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Transcript

MCCAULEY: Thank you for joining us, Mr. Gammill. Let's start with some of your history. When and where were you born?

GAMMILL: In a little town in north Louisiana by the name of Merrouge, not a very big place. I was born in my grandparents' home in 1933.

MCCAULEY: How did your family end up in Fort Bend County?

GAMMILL: I took a job in Shreveport when I graduated from Louisiana Tech. Then two or three years later, I was transferred into Texas, into Abilene, Abilene to Dallas, Dallas to Houston.

MCCAULEY: So what year did you end up in the Houston area as best as you can remember?

GAMMILL: 1966.

MCCAULEY: So pretty much all of your family history then was in Louisiana. You've become the first Texan essentially for this part of your story.

GAMMILL: That's correct.

MCCAULEY: So were you already married by the time you moved to Texas?

GAMMILL: Yes. My wife is from Louisiana, and we had one daughter born in Shreveport. A second daughter was born in Houston.

MCCAULEY: How old was your oldest daughter when you came to Texas?

GAMMILL: She must have been six years old because she was born in 1960.

MCCAULEY: At some point in your career did you get involved in city government?

GAMMILL: Yes, in Missouri City. We lived the first eight or nine years in Fondren Park, which is a part of Missouri City and happens to be in Harris County. There is a small park over there that is dedicated in my name, Jim Gammill Park, but it is in Harris County. Since I was in Missouri City property, in north Fort Bend County, I was on the city council there for probably three or four two-year terms.

MCCAULEY: So was your service to that city what prompted the honor of the park? How did that come about?

GAMMILL: There was a need for some repairs to the park, and there was extra land adjacent to the pool. The pool is what needed repair. We convinced the city council to buy the land and make a park out of it. It was a surprise to me that they named it Jim Gammill Park. I was honored with that.

MCCAULEY: What schools did your children attend there?

GAMMILL: Fondren Elementary School. The older daughter graduated from Westbury. The younger daughter was out here by the time she was starting school. She went to Huggins, then George Junior High, and then he graduated from Terry High School.

MCCAULEY: At some point you moved from the Missouri City area farther west.

GAMMILL: Yes, yes. I always wanted to get out to an area where you had a little bit of land around your house. We had made the first move to Fondren Park. The lots were fine but you were still looking at your neighbor's window. After seven or eight years in Fondren Park, we moved into Quail Valley. It was not a lot different. I was still not satisfied so I kept looking around further out in the suburbs. One weekend, we happened to venture further west and found Valley Lodge. As we drove through, I thought, "Yeah, I think this is it." We kept driving back and forth in Valley Lodge until we found a house for sale that we liked.

I was probably the only mayor that got caught in his own dog trap. We've always had problems with loose dogs in Valley Lodge/Simonton. The community is small and everything seems to work its way up through the mayor's office for review. This particular dog was a real pest, so I borrowed a dog trap from Fort Bend County Animal Control and sure enough, when I got to where the dog usually stays, he came out and tried to tear the tires off the truck. I put the trap out and opened the door on it. I wanted some scraps that I was using for the bait to go all the way in, to the far end of it, because I wanted him to get all the way in. So, I kept going further and further into the trap until I went too far and it tripped and came down on my back. I couldn't do anything but lay there for a minute laughing.

I had an image of myself in the trap, and somebody coming by and taking a picture of the mayor in his own dog trap. (laughs) I slowly composed myself enough to inch backwards and raise the trap door the best I could until I got out of it. Then I reset the trap door. I went around the block and came back and I had the dog. I put it in the truck, brought it home and had Fort Bend County come get the dog. But I said, "Leave the trap, we're not through yet."

I went in and told my wife what had happened. She said, "Let me see that trap." She walked out and around it and said, "Look on the far end where you are trying to go, the door just raises up like this. You didn't have to crawl in the far end of it." I said, "Heck Jean, anybody can do it that way." (laughs) If I have a distinction as being mayor here, maybe that's it. I was the only one caught in a dog trap.

MCCAULEY: I want to get back to a little bit of your service here. I was speaking with someone earlier in an interview, and I am curious. What kinds of things, other than just the space and the land, motivated you when you were looking at Valley Lodge? What were you drawn to about living in that community?

GAMMILL: Mainly, it was a rural area with the fact that houses on the most part were on an acre, sometimes a little less and sometimes a little more. The place we bought had four lots to it at the time. My brother and I were raised as children on a farm. It always appealed to me to have a little bit of acreage around the house. That's where we settled 36 years ago.

MCCAULEY: I heard earlier that the Simonton Roundup was an event centered around the community. Was that something that motivated you at all?

GAMMILL: Well, I was pleased to see it. It was not a deciding factor but the rodeo was still in operation when we came out here. As a matter of fact, if you check the history around that rodeo, you will find that the Premier of China came out here one time. The security was pretty strict because they had a lot of cars and a lot of people there. It was of interest to us. We did attend the rodeo several times. We had grandchildren with us by that time. We would take them to it. But it was not a deciding factor. We would have bought here anyway.



Former Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping rides through the Simonton Round-up Rodeo in a stage coach, ca. 1979

MCCAULEY: You were still working in Houston when you moved to Valley Lodge.

GAMMILL: Correct.

MCCAULEY: Let's talk about your public service. What do you think was your motivation first in Missouri City and then here to become an active councilman or mayor?

GAMMILL: Well, I suspect my reason for getting involved in Missouri City is about the same motivation as a lot of other people have when they get into politics. They are not happy with the way things are going, and they really believe they can do a better job than what's been done in the past. Missouri City was of interest back then because that is where we lived. So, I decided to run. There were other people that were unhappy. When I ran the first time we had three councilmen and a mayor elected. We had pretty much a clean sweep.

We did do some things different, which I thought was an improvement. Once you get involved with it, it is ongoing because everything that you wanted to do is not done at the end of your first term. So, you go to the second term. You go to the third term. I guess that was it with three terms rather than four.

MCCAULEY: How quickly after you moved to Valley Lodge did you consider running for office here?

GAMMILL: Probably about a year because of my history with Missouri City, I was interested in attending the city council meetings here. It was a VERY young council in the terms of the years that we had been a city, very young. Maurice Berkman was so instrumental and such a good guy. He was a mayor for about 17 years, but he was even older than I was (chuckles). It was obvious, he was not burned out, but he was planning on moving in to Houston. So, I decided to run for council. To be instrumental in future events, I think it's important to get a little acquainted with what's going on before you try to go for a mayor's position. So, I served a term or two in council and then ran for mayor, then three terms as mayor. In the small cities two-year terms are the norm.

MCCAULEY: You were first elected as mayor in '96. Is that right?

GAMMILL: That's correct.

MCCAULEY: What types of hardships and obstacles did you see the city facing? What kinds of things did you have to deal with as a politician?

GAMMILL: There were two main problems we had and we still have. The majority of Valley Lodge (80%) is in the hundred-year flood plain. We had an incident in December 1991 and January 1992. FEMA caused it. Then in October of '94 we had water in a number of homes in our community. That was a major concern.

The second issue was the roads. We had very limited resources. We had no *ad valorem* tax. We had money coming in from franchise fees, which was a large income that we had at that time. Probably the budget was maybe \$60,000 dollars a year, maybe. Out of which we paid for our insurance on the building and paid a part time secretary. Nobody in the city has ever drawn a salary, but there were still ongoing expenses, utilities. There was not much money, usually around \$30,000 or a little less a year, to do road repairs. If it hadn't been for Fort Bend County, we couldn't do it. We did it through an agreement with Fort Bend County where we would furnish dollars for the materials. They would furnish labor, equipment, and people to do the road. But we could only do two little old short roads. The crossroads in Valley Lodge were about a quarter of a mile. We could usually do two maybe three of them in a year.

In April and May of this year we had flooding problems. But since we've been working on it, all the new homes have been built above the base flood elevation. And we've done some other things to help the situation. This didn't happen in the sequence that I am going to give you, but in a sequence of taking care of the problem. There is a road on the north end of Valley Lodge called Rue Road. The two times it flooded when I was here, the water came across Rue Road from the ranch, and started running down the north/south streets into a bunch of houses between Wagon Road and Pony. There was a short street that I was talking about. It is kind of like a bathtub belly, so the water would go in there. We needed to improve the drainage so that it would stay in the ditches on Wagon Road and Pony and get down to FM 1093. The BIG problem was FM 1093. It had been topped so many times it was a DAM!

We finally got TXDOT to cut us about seven or eight smaller culverts. There were only BIG box culverts to let the water out. It is right there at the intersection. We got them to cut another seven, or maybe eight, between here and the bridge and the river, to let the water out to the south side. If we didn't stop it on Rue Road on the north end, at least we reduced the amount coming in. It improved drainage to get it from the north end or the south end, and then get it under the railroad on the south end so it wouldn't go into the homes. So far, it has worked.

MCCAULEY: Do you feel like those improvements were evident in April and May?

GAMMILL: They were part of it. The other big part was we put the floodgates in on Fort Bend Road because the river was coming in our big drainage ditch, which normally takes water out. But if it rains, we get water trapped in the subdivision. So, we have pumps in our city to pump it over the flood gates into the river side.

MCCAULEY: So what do you feel proudest of in terms of your public service here in the Simonton? What do you look back on fondly?

GAMMILL: I believe the improvement with drainage and flood control probably is the best. I maintained quite a handshake relationship with the majority of the people. We've had a lot of new people moving in now that I DON'T know. It bothered me sometimes that I don't know them, but I haven't been in office since 2002. So, it is understandable that I don't know everybody anymore.

MCCAULEY: How do you stay connected to people today?

GAMMILL: The church is very important. We are there on Sundays and again on Wednesday night. In addition to that, I have served on the Valley Lodge Property Owner's Association for years, helped to organize it as a matter of fact. They meet once a month. I think they do a remarkable job in trying to maintain property standards. I try to attend the council meetings. They meet once a month. Sometimes there are special meetings. I try to attend them in order to be better informed to coordinate between the two if it is necessary because otherwise you can have duplicate endeavors.

MCCAULEY: What church do you and your wife attend here?

GAMMILL: Community Church between here and Orchard, Simonton Community Church.

MCCAULEY: I'm thinking about the growth you commented on. What do you feel is the biggest changes to this part of Fort Bend County in your lifetime here?

GAMMILL: Mobility. The number of people that have moved in. We are on a borderline edge of the expansion. Fulshear has already had it. The next place to go is Weston Lakes. They are not built out, but they are fairly well built out. It is a pretty large community and it is a city. After that, it is Simonton. I think we have been fortunate in that Daniel McJunkin (current mayor) is so acquainted with building standards and codes. He has been able to pass some ordinances that have assured that we have quality building and correct elevations of the homes coming in to the area.

MCCAULEY: Do you garden? Do you do things in Valley Lodge that keep you connected to those farming roots?

GAMMILL: I've gardened for years. I have an ongoing feud with squirrels. And they won. Used to have an apple tree, but it is gone now. They eat my figs, my peaches, my pears, my pecans. I've even seen them going in the garden and take tomatoes and things like that. So, I blame it on them, but I am actually too old to do too much of it anyway. So, I don't garden, but since we have been out here, my wife and I have bought a hunting ranch in Live Oak County. It is not a big place. It is 335 acres, but we have a house down there. It is a place that our children and grandchildren like to go. It has wound up being another place to go to work for me. So, I am expecting them to take it over.

MCCAULEY: Do you have any reflection on how the races have interacted in the Simonton area? Are you aware of anything good or bad in that regard?

GAMMILL: Well, I am not aware of anything bad; although from time to time, there have been incidents of people breaking into stores and things like that. But for the most part, I think our community accepts all nationalities. It is not uncommon that each nationality likes to be with people of their own kind and color. So, you have a black community here, and you have a white community here, but the church has been very active in keeping everything working together for the betterment of the kids and the people who are not well off. They have activities during the year, but mainly at Christmas time, putting together presents for the kids, food for the adults.

MCCAULEY: Tell me about the career that brought you to Texas.

GAMMILL: My degree is from Louisiana Tech, in Ruston, Louisiana. It is in Petroleum Engineering. So, I was associated in the oil patch in one way or another for years. Mostly it has been with the equipment that is used in the oil patch, engine generator sets, pump units. When I came to Houston we also had a place in New Iberia, Louisiana, that built offshore power generation stations and motor control centers and such as that. I was in charge of that. But it has been oilfield related. The last ten years or so of my career, I worked with a company that did some pipeline maintenance, internal pipeline. In the business, these products are called pigs. You run them inside the pipeline to detect problems or to clean out the pipeline. But it has always been associated with the oilfield.

MCCAULEY: One of the things we have been asking people in this area has to do with the development of Spur 10. Is there anything you are particularly aware of or that you would comment about in terms of that aspect of mobility on that side?

GAMMILL: I think it was a VERY good decision to do it. You know it's called Browning.

MCCAULEY: Right.

GAMMILL: Clara Browning would probably be here this morning. It's named after her husband who was so influential in getting the land. For a bypass for the trucks, I think it has just been remarkable. It's just great!

NOTE: See Clara Browning's interview on the FBC Historical Commission website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=41392>

MCCAULEY: So primarily in keeping that truck traffic out of your community now?

GAMMILL: No, not out of our community so much as out of the community of Rosenberg. I use it sometimes. I would use it to bypass Rosenberg to get into Lake Jackson through Needville.

MCCAULEY: Is there anything specific that you'd like to share about how this part of Fort Bend County has developed in your time here.

GAMMILL: Well, I think as anyone who pays any attention, if you get out of your home and go anywhere you see the traffic. I've been real pleased with the way the County Commissioners have approached the Mobility Project. All of it takes longer than what any of us would like to have. I'm fortunate in being retired. I don't have to go into Houston very often. When I do have to go, I try to time it. But that has been something that I have appreciated from the County Commissioners and the Judge from the time they have been working it. Jim Adolphus was a friend of mine. He was on the City Council of Missouri City at the same time I was along with John Knox, who later became mayor over there.

MCCAULEY: Were you and Mr. Adolphus elected in the at same clean-sweep election that you mentioned, or he had already been on the Council?

GAMMILL: No, he came a little later, the next term, I think. There were three of us, and Jim was not one of them. But later, he came into Fort Bend County, and he worked hard to become judge. He and I have always been friends. He was a little bit more conservative than I am, Attila-the-Hun conservative. (laughs) You know there have been schools named after him in Fort Bend County.

MCCAULEY: o you see that as a GOOD development as a good thing for this part of the county, or do you have concerns about all those people coming in?

GAMMILL: I see it as being inevitable. I am not going to say good or bad. Some people think it's good. Some people think it's bad. I hear people saying, "I wish they wouldn't move out here." Well they are going to! The thing we have to do is be prepared for that. With what I mentioned earlier, with Daniel doing building codes, building permits, and trying to be sure that what does come into Simonton is of a quality nature. And that obviously is going to bring in Twinwood down here, which is such a big factor in our future. So, he works closely with them. They've got some big plans out here for development. They finally told us some of them about the downtown area and the property to the north. So, it is going to be different. And as I said, my only comment about it is inevitable; let's plan on it.

GAMMILL: I was the second mayor. Doug Sabasuta was the third. Lou Breaudeau was the fourth, and Daniel is the fifth.

MCCAULEY: He was very proud when we were introduced this morning to point out your name on the plaque at the door as one of the serving mayors. I am sure he is very excited to have your support. Is there anything else that you wanted to share?

GAMMILL: I shared probably more than what you wanted to hear.

MCCAULEY: We really appreciate your time today.

Interview ends