

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **John Frierson**

Interview Date: 06/24/2011

Interviewer: Diane L. Ware

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: Riverbend County Club, Sugar Land, Texas

8 Pages



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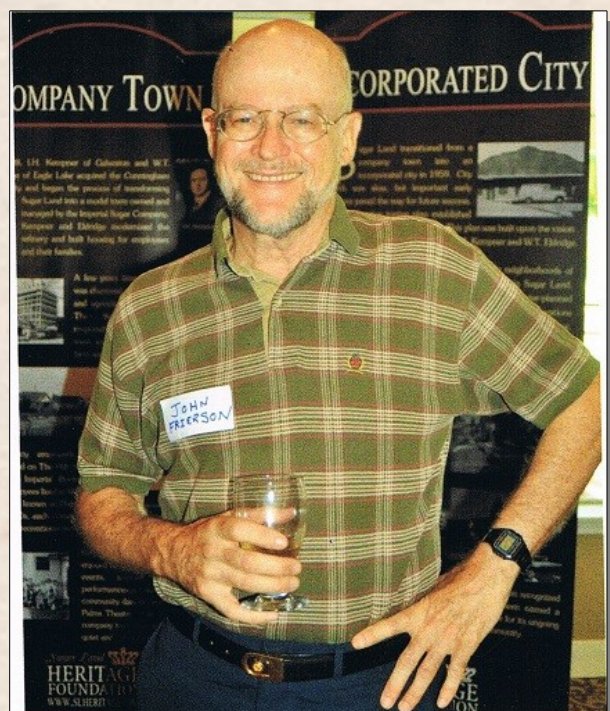
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Transcript

WARE: John, when and where were you born?

FRIERSON: I was born in the town of Sugar Land in 1949, in the old hospital over on Wood Street, where it intersects Lakeview. Several of my friends were born there. Tommy Laird and Janice Jenkins Gerard and several others were born there.

WARE: What brought your family to Fort Bend County?

FRIERSON: My father was working as the County Extension Agent in Sterling County out in West Texas. He'd been out of Texas A&M for a couple of years with a degree in Agricultural Administration. The director of the prison, O. B. Ellis, found out about my father's ability and had him come to Sugar Land to run the entire farming operation of the prison for the state of Texas. So, we moved to the prison farm in Sugar Land.

WARE: What year was that?

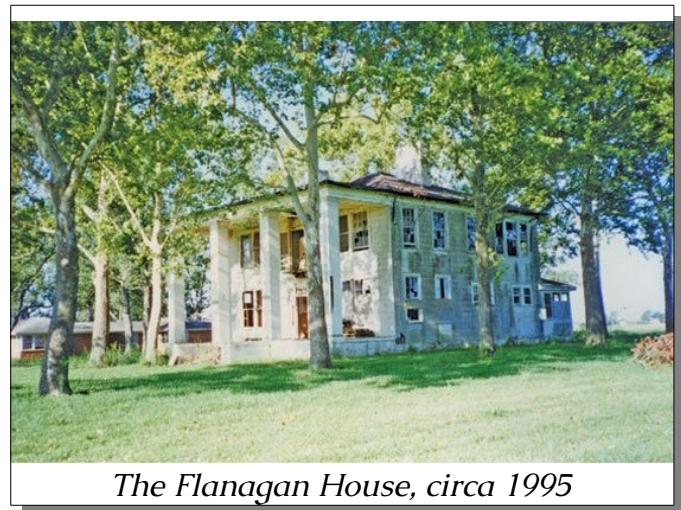
FRIERSON: That would have been either '48 or '49. It was real close to the time I was born.

WARE: Did you have extended family in the Sugar Land area?

FRIERSON: Not at the time. It was kind of a big move. There wasn't anyone else, no other Friersons were in the area at that time. I have three sisters. One sister is still in Sugar Land, one sister lives in Colorado Springs, and the other sister lives in Austin, Texas. I'm currently doing a good bit of traveling, in and out of the country, but I spend a fair amount of time in Sugar Land.

WARE: When you lived in Sugar Land, where did you live?

FRIERSON: The first residence was out on Flanagan Road (now University Boulevard), where we lived in the house of the former warden, Buck Flanagan, who was a real character. He'll be mentioned in a lot of the history books of Sugar Land. We lived in that house for four or five years.



The Flanagan House, circa 1995

Then it was remodeled over a period of about four or five months and we moved back into the same house, and that's where I spent the remainder of my childhood, up through college. My father retired from the prison about 1972. He worked for about twenty-three years in that job, as assistant director for agriculture. He was the biggest farmer in the state during that time.

WARE: I know they grew a lot of crops around there. Who did they sell the crops to?

FRIERSON: They sold some to whomever was desirous to my understanding, but most of it, to my knowledge, went to feed the inmates. They had a good economical program going, as far as the tax payer was concerned. The tax payer was feeding the inmates for a net cost of a nickel a meal for years and years. I guarantee you it's nothing like that now. I think a lot of people would say the prison was really run well back then. I don't think anyone that I ever saw was abused. The convicts worked, BUT I think most of them really wanted to get out of those cells and work. They were disciplined, but they ate really good. Like Warden Husbands used to say, "They worked hard, but they felt good." I think things ran well.

WARE: What other families lived near you?

FRIERSON: The Husbands boys were close to us a lot of time. When our house was being remodeled, we lived next door to them. We also lived next door to Gloria Hall at the same time. She used to babysit me and my sisters. I remember the Husbands boys. I know them really well. I would definitely consider the prison farm people as just one big family, an employee family. That's how I feel about them. I think that's how they feel too, you know; a close bunch of people. Mrs. Bunting, Richard Bunting's mother, worked for my father. She was his secretary for many, many years. B. J. and John Pitts were prison farm people. And just on and on.

WARE: Was there much turn-over for people that worked at the prison farm?

FRIERSON: I would say no. It was pretty steady work for everybody out there. My father stayed on until his retirement age. It was kind of the way things worked back then. The good old days.

WARE: Describe a normal day in Sugar Land, in your childhood.

FRIERSON: Well, it was different on the prison farm. We did not have the same kind of life as the kids growing up in Sugar Land because many if not most of the families had convict trusties as help, working in their homes. It was really different. It gave the kids the opportunity to talk to these people who had committed crimes. They didn't talk a lot about their crimes, but they would talk about other things. One of the trustees that we had in our house was in prison for murder. He was our cook and he was quite a character. I can remember a lot of their tales, their stories. Yeah, it was an interesting time.

WARE: Do you remember what his name was?

FRIERSON: This last one I mentioned, with some of the most interesting stories, the cook, was Woodard. I remember when he got out. My father came home with the news. Woodard was in the kitchen, cooking some supper, and Dad told him, "Woodard, we just found out you got your parole. It's come through." My dad said Woodard just dropped everything he was doing and walked out. Walked back to the prison to get his release papers and go, just straight away. (chuckles)

When I was living near the Husbands one Christmas, I got a bow and arrow set with some rubber stopper tips on the arrows. It was kind of fun playing with it. The next thing I remember, I took it over to show the Husbands. We were just all kids then. The three Husbands boys saw my bow and arrow and said, "Hey, John. Come with us. We'll fix you up, there."

So they took my bow and arrow set and took the rubber stoppers off the arrows and sharpened every one of them. Then one of them got in a car and took the rest of us out driving on some prison dirt back roads and we went rabbit hunting. They had me sitting up on the hood! Of course, I didn't have my bow and arrow; aw, they might have let me have it for a little while (still chuckling). Yeah, we were going rabbit hunting with my little bow and arrow. You can imagine what kind of luck we had, too!

WARE: (laughing) On a car?

FRIERSON: Yeah, from a car.

WARE: I'm thinking the Husbands boys might have been older than you, right?

FRIERSON: Yeah, they were older. Hal and Tim were the oldest, 9 and 8 years older respectively, than I was. Bobby was about 5 years older than me.

WARE: Growing up on the prison farm, could you have guns?

FRIERSON: Oh, definitely. Every time there was an escape, they got all the employees together to go out and hunt for the inmate. You know, that was kind of a group thing to do. I mean, they weren't going to shoot if they saw him, but they were going to look for him. I remember my dad packing up his gun or pistol, and we'd go out and look for the guy. One time we found one! He was in one of the home garages down at the end of Flanagan Road, down by the prison unit where the museum is now.

WARE: So, escapes were not that common?

FRIERSON: Maybe once every two or three years, something like that. They are probably more common now. They had better security then. Let me just throw in, I think Warden Husbands was one of the greatest wardens ever. He handled many, many situations with terrific efficiency. He was head of the Huntsville prison when Fred Gomez Carrasco took the hostages in the prison library, as part of an escape attempt. He handled that situation just as good as it could be handled. People entrusted him with a lot of responsibility. He was a good man and I really liked him. I knew him very well.

WARE: Tell me what you did for recreation and relaxation.

FRIERSON: I was not really a sports-oriented kind of a guy. I guess a lot of guys were. I didn't even like watching sports. I liked playing with model airplanes and things like that. I was a science-math kind of guy. A lot of the other fellows out there were really into playing baseball. I remember baseball games out there that were played with the inmates of the prison. They used to play down by the Number Two Unit where the museum is now. Right out there in front there was a big lawn where they would let the trustees out to play baseball with the neighborhood kids.

WARE: Where did you go to school?

FRIERSON: Sugar Land Elementary, Dulles Junior High, and Dulles High School. Sugar Land High School was renamed Dulles in 1959, when the consolidation took place.

WARE: Well, when you were in Sugar Land, at school, were there extra-curricular activities at the school, other than sports?

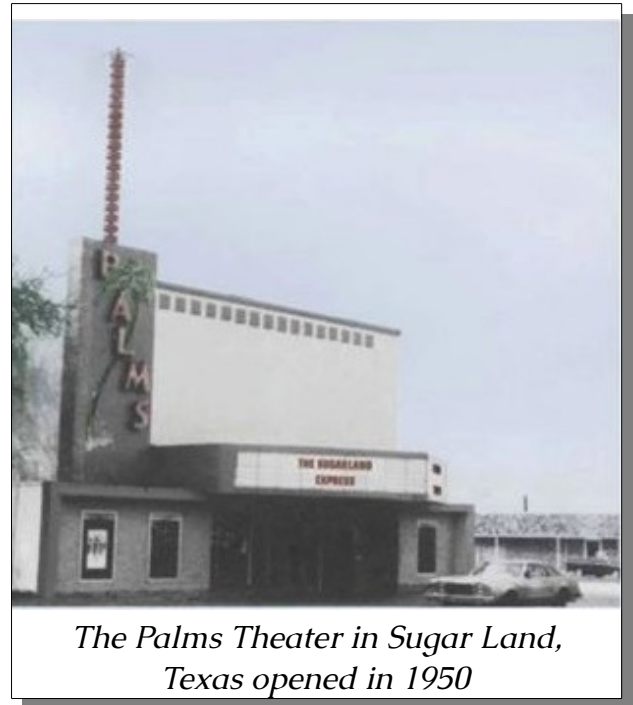
FRIERSON: There was band and Spanish Club and things like that.

WARE: Where did you go to the movies?

FRIERSON: Oh, the Palms Theater in Sugar Land was the place where everyone went.

WARE: Tell me about the Palms Theater.

FRIERSON: It's torn down now, as of about fifteen or twenty years ago. Sugar Land was a very small town when we were growing up; it was like 2,500 people. Everybody knew everybody, you know? The telephone operator knew everybody. Everybody knew everybody else's business and the theater was where everybody, EVERYBODY, went for their entertainment, if they didn't watch television. We were kind of far away, out on the prison farm, but we'd still get there on our bicycles or by walking. I remember a lot of the movies there. I remember as a little kid, having the hell scared out of me by some of those things, you know. (chuckles) I remember the first time I saw the Lady Dracula and her teeth growing out. I bolted away from the theater, down the aisle, running. Of course, I was only a small child then.



*The Palms Theater in Sugar Land,
Texas opened in 1950*

WARE: Were there blacks that attended movies at the Palms Theater?

FRIERSON: Yeah, there were. When we were growing up, everything was segregated and they had the segregated part of the theater at the back in the balcony. I was kind of innocent of what was going on, but I definitely recall that. Thank goodness that practice was eventually stopped. But that's the way things were, back then.

WARE: Okay, you went through Sugar Land schools the whole way. Did many of your classmates end up marrying each other?

FRIERSON: A number of them did. In my class, Randy King & Debbie Gulick married each other; Chris Pastuch and Carol DeLano married each other. I'm sure there are many more. Travis Gandy and Gloria Noyola, B. J. Pitts and John Pitts, and Gloria Hall and Ken Hall married each other.

WARE: So it wasn't uncommon.

FRIERSON: Oh, not at all uncommon. I mean, it was a pretty close-knit little community.

WARE: Did many of your classmates go on to work at Imperial Sugar or for the prison?

FRIERSON: Well, about the time we were getting out of high school, Sugar Land was just beginning its HUGE growth spurt. That was about the time things were really starting to change. My classmates and I were going farther off to schools. Sam McJunkin and I went to Texas Tech.

WARE: That's a long way!

FRIERSON: Yeah. Other kids went to A&M. I don't recall a lot of people going to work. One classmate I know went to work for the prison and I don't recall anyone that I knew in school that went to work for the sugar company. I know a lot of their parents worked there when they were growing up.

WARE: What was your classmate's name who went to work for the prison?

FRIERSON: Wayne Newton worked for the prison after he finished Texas A&M. He's in Chuck's [Kelly] and my class. Wayne's not here today, but I think he worked up in Palestine. I think he's retired now.

WARE: How many of your classmates still live in the Sugar Land area?

FRIERSON: Well, there's a good many in the class of '68. I'm kind of traveling in and out myself, but I know Chuck is currently living here. Of course, his brother, Bruce, younger than him, is living in Sugar Land. Joan Maresh is living in Sugar Land.

WARE: So it was fairly common for them to settle here?

FRIERSON: Yeah. Travis Gandy's here in Sugar Land and we had a classmate named Ray Valdez. He lives in Missouri City now. I think he grew up in Fresno. If I could see the pictures, I could tell you a lot more names.

WARE: Just before we stop, just tell me what comes to mind when people ask, "What's one of your favorite memories?"

FRIERSON: I tend to focus on people. I think Coach Dzierzanowski's the best coach that I knew. I wasn't athletic, but from the exposure that I had in sports and athletics, he seemed nice and outgoing. Not taking away from the other coaches but he seemed like such a great guy.

Bobby Husbands is a great guy, too; he's got the biggest heart. He worked most of his life taking care of these young kids and at the juvenile program in the City of Houston.

WARE: Thank you for the interview, John.

Interview Ends