

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **John Placette**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Bob Gaffney

Comments: Part of a series on the history of the building at 307 Fort Street,
Richmond, Texas

10 Pages



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Transcript

GOODSILL: Today is November 1, 2014. I am interviewing Mr. John Placette at 307 Fort Street, Richmond, Texas for the Fort Bend County (FBC) Historical Commission as part of the Oral History Project. This building was built as the FBC Jail in 1954. In 1981 was used as the Juvenile Detention Center, and then it became the Office of Emergency Management in 2005. I'm curious, John, which of those incarnations of this building were you involved with?

PLACETTE: It was the FBC Jail. I came to work for the Sheriff's Office in October 1976. I worked for nine months as a Bailiff at the FBC Courthouse and then transferred to this building to work in the Communications Section of the Sheriff's Office.

GOODSILL: Will you tell us about the duties of a Bailiff?

PLACETTE: The bailiff took care of the security and the organization of the courtroom, working directly for County Judges who were hearing cases, holding or presiding over trials.

GOODSILL: That was at the old County Courthouse here in Richmond?

PLACETTE: Right. As a matter of fact, I came full circle. I started at the historical courthouse and now that I work for the County Attorney's Office, I came back to the historical courthouse, thirty-five years later.

GOODSILL: Are you from Fort Bend County?

PLACETTE: I was born in Tyler and grew up in Rosenberg.

GOODSILL: So you got the bailiff's job and you had that for some time at the courthouse. Then what happened to your career?

PLACETTE: I came to the Sheriff's Office to work in the Communications Section.



Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management. The building was originally built as a jail and later renovated to the Juvenile Detention Facility.

GOODSILL: Was that a promotion?

PLACETTE: It was a lateral transfer at that time.

GOODSILL: What does communications do in the Sheriff's Office?

PLACETTE: We received calls from the public and dispatched the patrol deputies and detectives to whatever was needed.

GOODSILL: So what exact area of this building did you work in?

PLACETTE: Our office was on the first floor. As you enter the building, there was a lobby. Then there was a set of glass windows to the west side of the building. The Dispatch Office was located in that section. It was glassed-in on the east side of the office. On the west side of the office there was a wall. The Sheriff's Office was actually behind the Communications Office.

Back then, 1976, we did dispatch for the fire departments also. This was prior to the 9 1 1 system being implemented. The Sheriff's Office handled the majority of the dispatch calls for the county, including Stafford Police Department, Sugar Land, Needville, Richmond, and the other areas outside the cities. Rosenberg had their own dispatch officers and Missouri City had theirs. The rest of the county was handled by the Sheriff's Office.

GOODSILL: But each of those cities had their own police stations?

PLACETTE: Yes. Even though these Cities had their own police department back then, some of them didn't have a 24-hour dispatch system. They used the Sheriff's Office.

GOODSILL: Was this also the jail?

PLACETTE: Yes. The second floor was the men's section of the jail. There was set of jail cells, that were for women, on the first floor on the east side of the building. The capacity at that time was probably ten women and fifty men.

GOODSILL: And that was adequate?

PLACETTE: By the time I came to work it was overcrowded. So we needed to expand. The county had started to develop from being rural into being more suburban.

GOODSILL: So you had dispatch, you had the Sheriff's Office, you had the women's and men's jails, and all the jailers crammed in this area.

PLACETTE: The whole department worked out of this building. So the Civil Division had a separate building at the front, west side of the property and CID, the detectives, were in a building on the far west part of the property.

GOODSILL: The detectives researched the crimes?

PLACETTE: Right.

GOODSILL: What did the Civil people do?

PLACETTE: Civil processes involves subpoenas, civil citations, writs of all kinds, things that are handled by the Constable's Offices now.

GOODSILL: Can you tell us anything about how the building was built?

PLACETTE: I don't know any of the specifics of the construction. It was built extremely securely and was fortified. The building has a brick veneer on the outside but is concrete on the inside, especially in the cells, the steel bars and the steel doors were built for security purposes. Because of the thickness of the walls we were insulated from the elements, from the weather.

GOODSILL: You had air conditioning and heating?

PLACETTE: Yes.

GOODSILL: Were there any escapes while you were here?

PLACETTE: Not to my knowledge, because of how well it was built. There were a couple of people who escaped by running from the officers but, to my knowledge, all were captured within a very short amount of time.

GOODSILL: Was it an orderly or did it seem disorderly to you?

PLACETTE: It was very orderly. We probably only had fifty employees at that time. I'm not sure of the exact numbers. We were relatively small compared to what the county is today. We did have murders that were probably proportionate to the *per capita* populaion. But the people who committed the crimes were caught fairly quickly because of the small county.

There were times when I remember the warrants officers, in particular, Deputy Hal Knight, picked up the phone and called someone and said, "I've got a warrant for you. I need you to come into the Sheriff's Office," and they came in.

It seemed like the crime rate went up but it was because of the expansion of the Houston into Fort Bend County. Family violence was handled much differently then than it is today. If someone called in and said that a family member had assaulted them, if they didn't need medical attention, they were asked to contact the Justice of the Peace Court. They actually filed charges themselves. Sometimes reports were taken but there weren't the laws that allow arrests like we have today.

Women in law enforcement were relatively rare at that time. There were female officers titled "Matrons" that worked as the jailers for the females. The men were called jail deputies. When I was here, I was able to see the first female promoted to detective and some of the first female deputies.

GOODSILL: How long did you work here?

PLACETTE: For eight years. From 1976 until December 1983. When I came to work I was 19 years old.

GOODSILL: Old man.

PLACETTE: Right. When I started the legal age was 19 to be a law enforcement officer in Texas but you had to be 21 in order to buy bullets according to the federal law. Although I was 19 and could work as a deputy, I had to get someone else to buy my bullets. I was here for eight years and I moved up through the ranks. When I left I was a Patrol Sergeant.

GOODSILL: What does a Patrol Sergeant do?

PLACETTE: Supervise deputies assigned to a patrol division.

GOODSILL: Did you enjoy that?

PLACETTE: Yes, very much.

GOODSILL: Of the three jobs that you mentioned so far, bailiff, dispatcher, and patrol...

PLACETTE: At that time in my career I enjoyed patrol very much.

GOODSILL: Can you tell me some of the people that you worked with?

PLACETTE: The sheriff was Ervin Hurta. He was with the Sheriff's Department for at least twenty-some-odd years. He began his career as a deputy and worked his way all the way up to sheriff.

When I started, Joe Thorpe was chief deputy. He eventually left the Sheriff's Office and ran against Sheriff Hurta for sheriff but he only drew a small percentage of the votes. The patrol supervisor was Harvey Kramer. Harvey had been the police chief in Rosenberg before coming over to the Sheriff's Office as the patrol supervisor. There was also a patrol supervisor that I worked for, Lieutenant Roger Boyd. Roger and I have been lifelong friends. I just talked to him yesterday or the day before yesterday.

We had a Sheriff change when Ervin Hurta lost the election to Gus George. It was typical at that time for a sheriff to bring in his own personnel. I left before Gus actually took office, thinking that I needed to go elsewhere.

So I went to Sugar Land Police Department and was there for three years. I was a Patrolman and Field Training Coordinator. It was different because working for the county, which was so big, we were used to going miles to get to a call, whereas the city was much more compact. I started January 1984 and left December of 1987.

I went to work for the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission. I was with them for twenty years. I retired from them. We handled all the laws for anything that pertained to alcohol, from the manufacture of alcohol all the way down to the ultimate consumer.

GOODSILL: What can you tell me about that because I don't know anything about that job?

PLACETTE: The Alcohol Beverage Commission was first created as the Liquor Control Board right after Prohibition. It was designed to regulate alcohol and to keep organized crime from entering into the State in the way that it did in some of the other states.

We enforced all the liquor laws from sales to minor-in-possession of alcoholic beverages to money laundering cases. The alcohol business was such that it was a cash business. It was easy for someone to open a business establishment and to put money into it as if it was coming in on sales and then go out. It was actually laundering money.

GOODSILL: Did you enjoy that?

PLACETTE: Yes, very much.

GOODSILL: That was an interesting part of your career. You did that for twenty years?

PLACETTE: Yes. I've lived all over the state.

GOODSILL: Because the Alcohol Beverage Commission is a state agency?

PLACETTE: Yes. I worked in Corpus Christi for four years, Houston for a year, Wharton for six months. I made sergeant and went to Abilene for two years. I came back to Richmond as a sergeant so I was here for a period of time then made lieutenant and went back to Corpus (Christi) and then came back to Houston.

GOODSILL: What did you do after that?

PLACETTE: I worked for the Harris County Precinct One Constables Office. I was with the Incident Management Section of the Harris County Toll Road Authority for a couple of years and then I was back with the constable's office proper. I wound up in the Mental Health Division of the constables office.

GOODSILL: You've had a career with a lot of variety. What did you do in the Mental Health Division?

PLACETTE: We actually served the mental health warrants. When someone was in crisis, usually a family-member, or a doctor asked the court to issue an emergency warrant to place them under the care of the mental facility. Under the order, we took them to the mental hospitals or medical care. Just in Harris County. Some of it was Ben Taub Hospital but there are probably twenty different facilities in Harris County.

GOODSILL: Private facilities?

PLACETTE: Yes. We're only talking four years ago (2010) when I first got there. The Harris County Constable's Office Precinct One handles all those papers for Harris County. There are some that are issued to the Sheriff's Office and the Houston Police Department. The Harris County Sheriff's Office has their Intervention Team that handles cases. But the Harris County Constable's Office handles the vast majority of them.

GOODSILL: How'd you like that?

PLACETTE: It was very, very stressful. You had to be prepared for anything that might happen. We had all kinds of things happen that were serious. Sometimes the workload was overwhelming.

GOODSILL: And the unpredictability of what you had to deal with...

PLACETTE: Right. That's one of the reasons that I came to the FBC Attorney's Office. The County Attorney's Office is a civil office that handles, among other things, mental health processes.

I've been able to use my experience from Harris County at the FBC Attorney's Office. At the County Attorney's Office I've been able to use all the experience that I've gained over the years. It all comes into play in my areas of responsibility.

The County Attorney's Office handles the representation (of) the county in several cases and in developing contracts and other things in the business aspect of the county. So the County Attorney's Office represents a lot of the lawsuits that may be filed. Some of these involve the Sheriff's Office or the Constable's Office in just the routine work that comes up. The experience that I've had in the various areas has helped me in my job as an investigator – in helping the attorneys do their job.

GOODSILL: Your title was Harris County Attorney Investigator? Now that is your title here in Fort Bend County?

PLACETTE: Yes. An attorney may have a question about something in particular. So they ask me to look into that, to fill in some of the blanks sometimes. Roy Cordes is brilliant. It's amazing the way he remembers details – better than any person I've ever known. Sometimes you don't want him to remember all the details. But he does. (both laugh)

We have different divisions within the County Attorney's office. There's the Litigation Division. The General Counsel Division. We have a set of attorneys that are the Family Law Division, who handle CPS (Child Protective Services) cases.

GOODSILL: So this has been a satisfying job for you because there's a lot of variety?

PLACETTE: It's more on the civil side not the criminal side. Although I'm still commissioned as a police officer, I'm not jumping fences and tackling people anymore. I'm too old for that.

GOODSILL: It's a good job at this age in life. What else could I ask about?

PLACETTE: The types of buildings and the technology available to the Sheriff's Office / County has changed tremendously. When I started at the Sheriff's Office, in order to check a vehicle registration or criminal history, it was typed into a coding machine that created a strip of paper. The strip of paper then had to be removed from the machine, placed into a teletype system, and sent to Austin. They did the same thing on their end and then sent it back. Our machine read the teletype that was sent and you had the display on the vehicle. If someone saw it today they wouldn't believe how much time it took!

Now everything is instantaneous. The databases and technology that are available – and what is coming in the future – is just Star Wars compared to what we had back then. The retinal displays for the eyes, the reading of identity, DNA; when I started, was not even heard of by law enforcement. Now we discover who the person is that committed the crime through the DNA process or exonerate somebody who is innocent rather easily. Previously there were people who were convicted on eyewitness testimony, which is not 100% reliable. Any technology that convicts the guilty and exonerates the innocent is a good thing.

The actual crime rate has gone down. I think that's because we're carrying cell phones, we're carrying cameras, and the technology's really working.

GOODSILL: What are modern jails like when compared to a jail like this?

PLACETTE: In a lot of ways they're very similar. Although here in this building there were tanks where you might have multiple prisoners. There were also a lot of individual cells. In the middle of jails, the individual cells are designed to be the sleeping quarters for the inmates. Where they're allowed to come out of their individual cells and associate with the people around them. That's basically for psychological purposes. Humans are social animals and if someone is confined, their mental health deteriorates. The system of solitary confinement is slowly going away. In my opinion, it's always been a cruel treatment for a person.

GOODSILL: Did you have anything to do with this building when it was used as the Office of Emergency Management?

PLACETTE: No, I had already left by that time. While I was here, we moved into what we called the new jail on Ransom Road. Back then it was just a one-story facility. It's grown at least three times since then. It has the two towers now with that jail facility.

The County Attorney's Office worked with Emergency Management on anything that might come up involving emergency management for the county. I've only been with the County Attorney's Office a couple of years. We haven't had any hurricanes, any natural disasters, or any man-made disasters so we've not been lucky so far.

GOODSILL: I feel this has just been a great interview. Can you think of anything else that you might want to add?

PLACETTE: The people that you are going to interview today, Al Dodson, Larry Spillers, Danny Jan, I've known forever. Al Dodson actually hired me as the bailiff. I interviewed for the job in the dining room of his home.

NOTE: See Danny Jan's interview on the FBC Historical Commission Web Site at <http://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=42146>

GOODSILL: (laughs) Make it official.

PLACETTE: Right. On a Sunday afternoon.

GOODSILL: How did he pick you? You were nineteen at that time. Can't know a whole lot.

PLACETTE: I have no idea. The bailiff's position at that time was brand new. It paid a little bit less than a regular deputy so they wanted somebody that was brand new.

GOODSILL: Did you like that job?

PLACETTE: Yes. It was probably the best thing that ever happened to me after starting out working in the court system. I got to see what each individual person did in the trial process. I think that created a base that helped me throughout my career.

GOODSILL: Helped you understand how criminal justice works and the civil part you learned separately?

PLACETTE: The civil part, a lot of it came from working with the Sheriff's Office. At that time, we were small that we got to see a cross section of everything. Now everything is more specialized. Some of the best investigators that I ever saw were the ones back then when everyone knew how the system worked completely and were exposed to every aspect.

GOODSILL: Any names come to mind?

PLACETTE: Well, Harvey Kramer, that I mentioned earlier, and Roger Boyd. Those guys were two of the best investigators I've ever seen.

GOODSILL: Thank you so much for coming down.

PLACETTE: You've welcome. Thank you.

Interview Ends