

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Leonard Leon Scarcella - 2016**

Interview Date: 07/06/2016

Interviewer: Bill Duggan

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Comments: Interview conducted in Commissioner Grady's office
Stafford, Texas, on the topic of Memories of Missouri
City High School Gym

12 Pages



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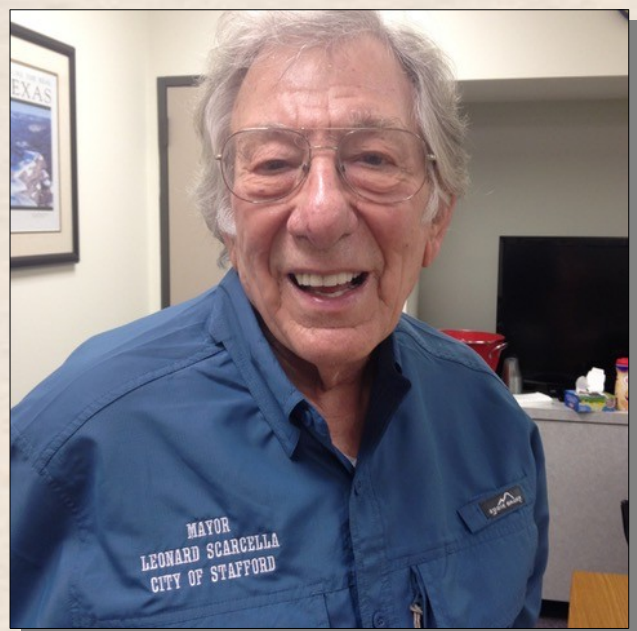
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Transcript

DUGGAN: Please tell us your name and date of birth.

SCARCELLA: My name is Leonard Leon Scarcella, and my date of birth is July 19, 1940.

DUGGAN: Has your family lived in Fort Bend County a long time?

SCARCELLA: My family has lived here since 1935, and I've lived in Stafford all my life. I was born in Sugar Land, and got out of there in three days. I often kid people that I heard they were going to term limits, so I moved to Stafford. My mother and father met at the Missouri City school. She was a teacher, and he was the band director. They married, and then I was born in 1940.

DUGGAN: What kind of work did your parents do?

SCARCELLA: My father was a very accomplished musician. Not only did he direct the band and teach the students, but he also had a "big band orchestra" back in the 1940s, and they played at the Rice Hotel, which was pretty special. Before that, when he was a younger man, he played in the Chicago Symphony. Then he came to Houston and played in the Houston Symphony. He was very proud of the fact that they had a facility right over where the Sears and Roebuck still stands in downtown Houston. It was called the Houston Conservatory of Music. All of the musical prodigies in the Houston area would come there for lessons, and he taught there. He was a long-time and leading music instructor there. He could literally play any instrument. My father died when I was 10, in 1951. That was one of the great losses of my life. He had high blood pressure and at that time they didn't have anything except Phenobarbital, which would be like taking candy pills now. Sadly, they couldn't do anything and he died.

DUGGAN: You said he met your mother in Missouri City?

SCARCELLA: Yes. She was a teacher. She came here from the little area right outside of College Station, between College Station and Caldwell, right on the Brazos River. My grandfather decided that she could not get the education there that she needed, so he sent her here when she was in her junior year. She finished at Missouri City High School, and that was during the height of the Depression. Her name was Margaret, and he said, "Margaret, I don't have a lot of money, but you need an education. I have enough money for you to get a college degree if you can do it in 2-1/2 years."

So as soon as she graduated, she took her cap and gown off, and enrolled in Southwest Texas State Teacher's College. I believe Lyndon Johnson was there at that time. She never took a break and got her degree in 2-1/2 years in education. Then she came back to Missouri City High School and her first job was to teach high school English.

After that, her true love was to teach youngsters, second-graders. She loved that more than anything. She also became very accomplished in teaching phonics. At that time, that was a pretty innovative concept. She had several universities that wanted to hire her, such as Rice. Sam Houston made a big move to try to get her to go to Huntsville to teach teachers how to become proficient in teaching phonics. And she said, "No, I enjoy teaching phonics. I'm not interested in teaching others how to teach it. I'm interested in children learning phonics so they can use it to better themselves throughout their lives." And that's what she did. She taught for 47 years with the Missouri City system from 1935 through the time of consolidation in 1959 with Fort Bend ISD. She retired from FBISD. Of course, it had been kind of controversial because we had started the Stafford Municipal School District, and they weren't too enamored of the fact that she was my mother and was supportive of Stafford MSD. Then, in 1984, once we got the Stafford MSD set up, she became a board member and served 9 years on that board.

Then she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and that really messed her up. She lived for another 11 years, but at the end she couldn't hear or speak or move. It was a tragic thing. But education was her life-long calling. She was very proud that she had so many students in this area that used to say, "Mrs. Scarcella taught me at Missouri City," or "taught me in the 2nd grade."

DUGGAN: I've met some people who have mentioned that. As you know, this whole interview today is about the Missouri City school system. What years did you attend?

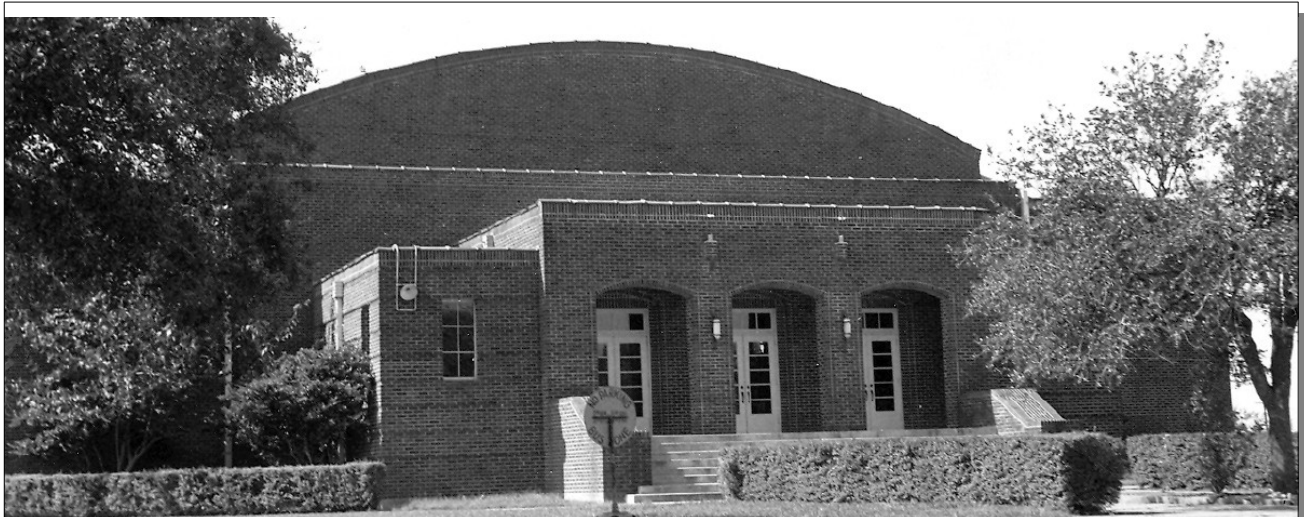
SCARCELLA: I started in 1946. In those days, you started after Labor Day because everybody was out in the cotton fields. There was no air conditioning, so everybody started after Labor Day and finished by the end of May, again because it was getting so hot by then. I started in 1st grade in 1946 and went all the way through the 12th grade in 1958. We had 31 in our graduating class, but there were only 28 who graduated in 1958.

The interesting thing about the Missouri City school that needs to be cleared up is that it wasn't just kids from Missouri City and Stafford. Many of the kids who now go to the Alief schools came to Missouri City. There were no Alief schools in those days.

Many of the children, all the way to South Main Garden, who would have gone to HISD, came to Missouri City because it was closer. We had an area now, that if you were to say how many children are educated in the area that was Missouri City High School back when I graduated, you would probably have somewhere between 5 and closer to 10 thousand students today in that area that were going to Missouri City and that we had those 28 graduates from. There were only white children in the school up until 1946. In 1946, Mexican or Hispanic children were allowed, but no African-American children were. They weren't allowed in until 1965.

DUGGAN: Was the school laid out where all 12 grades were in the same building?

SCARCELLA: No. Over at the end, the far end was the elementary school, 1st grade through 5th grade. Then there was a little hallway, and they had the 6th, 7th and 8th grades, the junior high, there. Then down another little hallway, you had the different rooms for the different subjects and the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades were there. So, all 12 grades were there, and they all connected into the gymnasium. Everything migrated to the gymnasium during the day and at night.



Former Missouri City Middle School gymnasium will be restored to its original art deco design with help from Fort Bend County. --communityimpact.com, Nov. 30, 2016

DUGGAN: Do you remember your first day of school?

SCARCELLA: Yes, I do. I think it was the day after Labor Day, 1946, and I was in Mrs. Robinson's class. I will never forget Mrs. Robinson. So many of the people you will be talking to had Mrs. Robinson in 1st grade, my mother for 2nd grade, and Mrs. Cook in the 3rd grade, and there was a lady named Mrs. Kopher.

DUGGAN: Did they have school buses back then? Did you live close enough to walk?

SCARCELLA: There were definitely school buses. That was the thing when we created Stafford that Missouri City had school buses since 1931, and then all of a sudden FBISD decided in 1976 they were going to discontinue that service that had been in effect for 45 years in Stafford and Missouri City.

DUGGAN: So you rode the bus?

SCARCELLA: Well, since my mother taught and my father taught, a lot of the time I rode with them. I would have rather ridden the bus every chance I got, which I did, because you got to be with all your friends.

DUGGAN: Do you remember what time school started?

SCARCELLA: I don't remember. I don't think it was quite as early as it is now. I think it was something like 8:00 in the morning and went until 3:30 or 4:00. You have to remember that everything centered around farming. The children had to get off to school after they had done their farm chores, such as feeding the cattle or the chickens and then chores after school.

DUGGAN: I know there was no air conditioning at that time. What kind of heating was there for the winter?

SCARCELLA: Those buildings were not built to keep the air in. They were built so air could come in. During the summer, that made them livable. During the winter, all of them could get awfully cold at night because a norther would come through. The buildings were built with slits in them so air could come through. Most people had open-faced heaters in their homes, which were very dangerous. Anything could happen. During the summer you had attic fans and you had a water dripping process where cool water would drip onto the fan and the fan supposedly cooled the house.

After Labor Day was when things would start to get cooler. The schools closed by Memorial Day when it was getting hotter. So, during the dog days of summer, no one went to school.

DUGGAN: So there were no summer school programs.

SCARCELLA: No there were no summer school programs. My mother did a little bit of tutoring. There were none of the programs you have today. You either got it during the school year or you didn't get it.

DUGGAN: What about food? Was there a school cafeteria?

SCARCELLA: Oh, yes, and it was a good one. They still have the same kind of menus to some extent. I still remember hamburgers, hot dogs, fish sticks – things of that nature.

DUGGAN: You could tell what day it was!

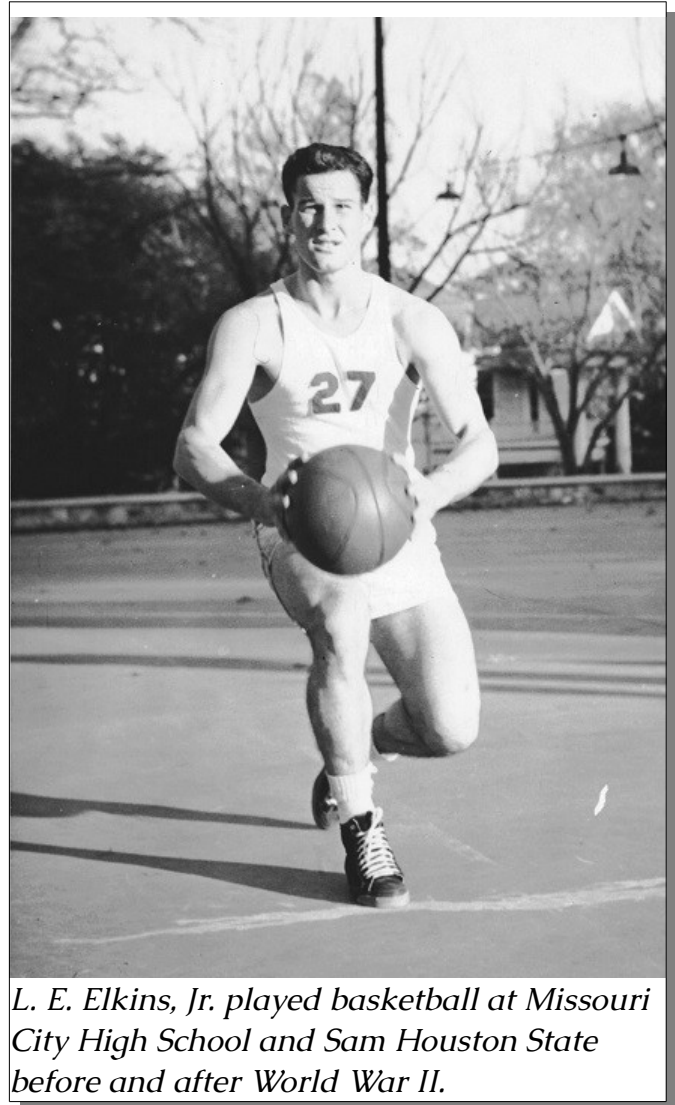
SCARCELLA: Absolutely! Fish sticks were served on Friday.

DUGGAN: Do you remember a lot of your classmates?

SCARCELLA: I do. We've been very fortunate in that quite a few are still living. We've stayed in contact with each other. Our 1958 graduating class had our 50-year reunion in 2008. Out of the 28, 17 came, and they came from everywhere. One man worked on the moonshot with NASA. Here we are, 70 years later, and we still have friends from the 1st grade.

DUGGAN: Do you remember the names of some of your other teachers, from junior high and high school?

SCARCELLA: Mrs. Cook and Mrs. Kopher, through the first five grades. One of our best teachers at Missouri City was Lawrence Elkins. He was a basketball star, playing in the gymnasium we're talking about, and I think there should be a picture of him playing. He was probably the best basketball player Missouri City ever produced.



L. E. Elkins, Jr. played basketball at Missouri City High School and Sam Houston State before and after World War II.

I think he went to Sam Houston State and played there, and then he came back, and very much like my mother, he taught math. He was an outstanding math teacher. When we were creating the Stafford MSD, it was rather sad. He had been my math teacher in junior high at Missouri City. When he was the superintendent of FBISD and I was the mayor of Stafford, we were on opposite sides. He had also been my track coach. Miss Lewis was an English teacher and she was very good. Miss Hamil, whose family lived in the area, was an English teacher. There were many people whose families grew up here and their parents taught at Missouri City for decades. I remember my mother telling me that when she started teaching here, she made \$300 a year that first year. I think they paid them over nine months and they had to figure out how to make it through the summer.

DUGGAN: What about principals? Do you remember them?

SCARCELLA: Yes. Mr. E. A. Jones was our principal just about all the way through. E. A. Jones Elementary was named after him. Mr. L. P. "Pat" Rodgers was the superintendent. They were here the whole time. Jim Ellis came along later, as well as Bill Shaver. They were coaches when we were in high school. There was another coach named Font Wade. He played on the A&M team that won the national championship. But he played behind John Kimbrough, so he didn't get to play a lot. Those are the names that immediately come to mind.

DUGGAN: What do you remember about the quality of the instruction?

SCARCELLA: Excellent! And no frills. Sometimes when it would get really hot, there was a big oak tree and we would sit under the oak tree and be taught. There was discipline and there was commitment. The students were glad to be there. Not that we didn't cut up because we surely did. But there was an attitude and discipline that you don't see today. I can give you an example, using my mother. I was walking around the room and talking to my friends. My mother said, "Leonard, sit down and be quiet." And I kept walking around. The next thing I knew, she went 'BAM' and hit me upside the head and knocked me into a chair. There was an old trashcan that had wheels on it and the trashcan went flying, and I hit the chair. She told me after she hit me, "I told you to sit down and shut up." Today there would be demonstrations against that. There was no question about the discipline. Everybody knew they were there to learn and it was important. If they didn't learn, they could certainly be out in the cotton fields, picking cotton or chopping cotton or corn. There was great pride in being able to attend school and everybody was so proud of Missouri City High School and Missouri City.

We were rivals with Sugar Land. We had a pretty good football team a couple of years. Sugar Land had Kenneth Hall, who broke all the records. When Kenneth Hall was at Sugar Land, their record was 34 –1–1. They lost to Missouri City, 12-0, and they tied Missouri City 12-12 his junior year. Our best players graduated. Then there wasn't anybody who could stop Kenneth Hall. So, they squib kicked the ball to him. Sugar Land got the ball, and in the first play of the game, they hiked him the ball and they ran the Notre Dame box. Coach Hightower was the coach, and he was obviously so proud of Kenneth. Kenneth Hall was one of the most spectacular specimens of a man I have ever seen in my life. He won the state track meet by himself! He won the 100-yard dash, the 200-yard dash, the shot put, the discus, and he anchored the winning 440-yard relay team. They won the meet 25 to 24, beating Anahuac.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read Kenneth Hall's interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=40325>

We would go there to play and first play out of the box. They hiked the ball to Kenneth, and he ran 60 yards right up the middle of the field. Everybody went crazy. They had red flags in those days, not yellow flags. There was a red flag because Sugar Land was offside. They marked off 5 yards, hiked the ball to him again, and he went 65 yards up the field. If I remember the score correctly, they beat Missouri City something like 53 to 18. It was THE game every year, between Missouri City and Sugar Land. They had some good players, and we had some good players. Sugar Land was Class B and that's why they never went to the state finals. Class B could only go as far as regional. Missouri City was Class A, but we never got to the state play-offs.

They had newspaper articles about Kenneth Hall all the time. I think it was against Lutheran, they hiked him the ball seven times. He ran for seven touchdowns, kicked seven extra points, and they led 49-0 at half time. Then Coach Hightower didn't put him back out there. If they'd let him go back in in the 2nd half, he'd have scored another 49 points! Those memories are so vivid. Sugar Land's colors were green and white and they were the Gators. Our colors were blue and gold and we were the Mustangs.

DUGGAN: Were there dances and other entertainment at the gym?

SCARCELLA: Oh, yes, for the students. A guy named Paul Berlin was one of the top disc jockeys in Houston for years. I think he came from Tennessee. He was a friend of one of our classmates, and he played poker with one of our classmate's daddy.

Stafford and Missouri City was interesting because during Prohibition, Stafford kept Houston supplied with bootleg liquor. They had horse racing and gambling in Missouri City. I won't say everybody was on the take, but something was going on. Many years later, I was playing in a member/guest golf tournament at River Oaks Country Club. A gentleman saw my name up there and asked if I was the mayor of Stafford. I said, "Yes." No Italians were allowed at River Oaks Country Club. The first Italian allowed into the club was a doctor who joined Dr. Denton Cooley. I saw his name up there and I asked my friends, "Is he a member?" One of them said, "Yes. He's a doctor, and he came all the way from Rome to join Dr. Denton Cooley's staff. He is world-renowned." But one guy said, "That's nothing. Have you seen his three daughters?" Once the membership committee saw his daughters, all their sons wanted them in the club so they could date the daughters.



Prohibition enforcers dump bootleg (illegal) liquor to prevent it's sale. The law was widely ignored. The popular satirist Will Rogers commented, "Prohibition is better than no liquor at all."
 --courtesy Wikipedia

EDITOR'S NOTE: Prohibition of Alcohol during the Great Depression. The 18th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution – known as the Prohibition Amendment – was adopted in the 1920s and made the making, selling, possessing, and consuming of alcoholic drinks illegal. Franklin D. Roosevelt ran for president on a platform calling for Prohibition's repeal, and easily won victory over the incumbent President Herbert Hoover. --courtesy Wikipedia

DUGGAN: Were you involved in athletics?

SCARCELLA: There was no Little League here. You had to drive into Houston to play Little League. Anything you did was on the high school team. I ran track. Lawrence Elkins was my track coach in high school. We had a pretty decent track team.

We had football, basketball and track in high school. We didn't have baseball. There were no tennis courts, certainly no golf courses. That was something they did in River Oaks or the Houston Country Club.

DUGGAN: Was the gym used as a community center?

SCARCELLA: Yes. It was used for everything that anybody could do in there. We had the Junior/Senior Prom, the dances, Paul Berlin and a special sock hop – all was held there. Of course, the volleyball and basketball teams played in there. During football season or track season, that's when you had the other social activities. It was truly the heart of the school. Nearly every day you went to the gym to see what everybody had done that day, or there might be an event that night. The senior play was always a big thing. It was the center of the Missouri City High School universe.

DUGGAN: Was it ever used for city functions?

SCARCELLA: There were none. Stafford and Missouri City didn't become cities until 1956. By 1959, we consolidated the schools. The City of Missouri City and the City of Stafford had about \$100,000 a year to operate the whole city on. You didn't take any of that money to spend on a party because you might need it for drainage or something.

DUGGAN: What other memories do you want to share?

SCARCELLA: I think this has been a broad swath of what I remember about Missouri City High School. There was a big rain or something in 1949, at Rice, and they couldn't play the Southwest Conference game there. So, they came here to play it. This was considered the premier high school gymnasium in the Houston area. When you played in the Sugar Land auditorium, you played in what everybody called the cracker box. It was so small that you could not put your feet against the wall without being out of bounds and in bounds at the same time. You had to turn your feet like a duck. That's why there is so much pride in the Missouri City gym. You'll hear many similar stories. There was great pride, respect and appreciation because we realized that if something didn't go right in Europe or Japan, then we could lose America. There was an attitude toward America that you don't have today. Everybody takes so much for granted. We didn't take it for granted. Nobody was disrespectful because we really recognized that our survival as a country was at stake, and we were all committed to the war effort.

I have a couple of memories of when the war was over and everybody just came out into the streets to celebrate that we had won the war. I'll always remember when Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. They had the funeral procession on the radio. There were no televisions then. I remember hearing the broadcast, and the broadcaster had a voice like God, like Barbara Jordan. He had that type of voice. You could hear the sound of horse's hooves in the cortege and the description by the announcer of how the boots were turned backwards in the stirrups of the riderless horse. They described that funeral procession. If somehow you could take today and put something out there, I could transmit to you back exactly what I heard, and I was four years old. There are some things that are just embedded in your memory.

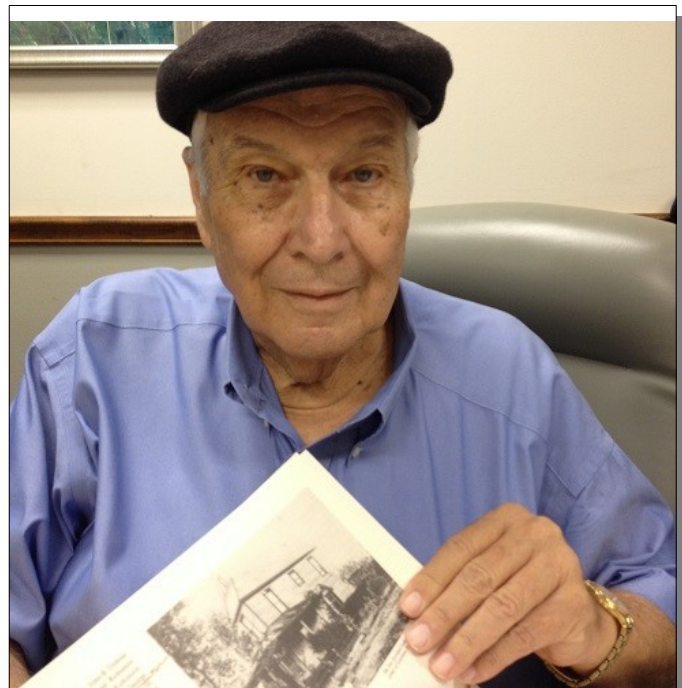
It was an interesting time to grow up, and I've told many friends that we grew up during a very good time. We grew up through World War II, and we understood what that was all about. Obviously, Korea as well, and then we saw the moon shot, men going to the moon, and all the tremendous medical advancements. We've seen all of these things.

The Astrodome was built for \$23,000,000. Now it's got to be a billion and a half, or it's no good, and you have a screen that goes completely around the whole stadium. I've been fortunate to live in a very exciting era.

DUGGAN: You've witnessed a lot of history.

SCARCELLA: Yes, a lot of history. I'm sure different people have different views. The only thing that bothers me so much now is a lot of people want to re-write history. The people that you are talking to lived it as it was, not as somebody wants to re-write it.

I really appreciate your taking the time to interview me. It was truly a pleasure. I commend you, Commissioner Prestage, and everyone who has worked so hard. I know John Ferro and Allen Robinson worked extremely hard to preserve the gym.



John Ferro and his classmates worked long and hard to save the Missouri City High School gymnasium from being torn down after school district consolidation.

Without their persistence, someone would have knocked that gym down. They said, “Not no, but hell no!” If John heard that someone was going to do something, he would send out memos, he'd call everybody, and bring people from all over the country to come and support saving the gym. He successfully stopped it, and he deserves a lot of credit for that.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read Leonard Scarcella's 2014 interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=41519> and Frank John Ferro's interview, also on this website, at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=47556>

Interview ends