

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Lida Louise Davis McNeill**

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Interviewer: Brian McAuley

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalca

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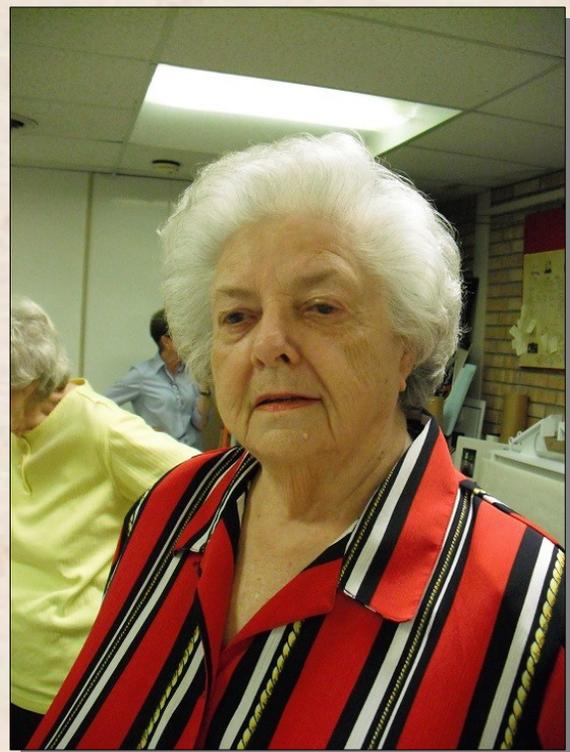
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*Transcript*

McAULEY: Ms. McNeill let's just start with basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

McNEILL: I was born in Sugar Land, in May 1930 – the best month of all.

McAULEY: Was your family living in Richmond at that time?

McNEILL: Yes. We didn't have street names then but our house was on Sixth and Houston in Richmond, the corner right behind the Baptist church. The doctor lived next door to us when I was born. One time my mother said she was holding me and I turned blue so they called for Dr. Nichols, who was the only doctor in town for a long time. He jumped the fence and came over and looked at me. I was okay. I don't know what happened. I just wanted attention I guess.

Practically everybody that was in Richmond when I was growing up came from Wharton. That's where my folks came. Both of them lived in Wharton. My daddy didn't grow up in Wharton but my mother did and he lived in Wharton.

I don't really know why they moved to Richmond but it was during the depression. People didn't have jobs, they were poor. Whew, we had a lot of poor people in Richmond back then. People were struggling just to live, a lot of them were. I don't really know why they came here. Daddy worked in two or three different jobs; I think he worked in the cotton mill at one time and he worked in a bank at one time then he ended up in the post office. Then he became post master.

McAULEY: Where was the post office located at that time?

McNEILL: The post office was on Morton Street right on the corner, where Sandy McGee's is today. Dr. Nichols' office was up above it, upstairs.

McAULEY: Were your grandparents here at that time as well?

McNEILL: No, they were in Wharton.

McAULEY: Did your mother do any kind of work?

McNEILL: My mother bluffed her way into a job at the courthouse. She had never worked and she went to the court house to get a job and they asked her if she could type and she said yes she could. She never typed in her life, but she got a job. Then she worked for the newspaper.

Eventually she became a florist; she was about the first florist that had a flower shop in Richmond-Rosenberg. It was on Avenue H, close to Third Street. There was a couple that lived there with a little convenience store. They built a little shop for her on the other corner. It was in the thirties. She started standing on the street at the Cole Theater on Third Street in Rosenberg selling pot plants. She went to one of the biggest florists, Wademans, I believe, in Houston and asked them if they would teach her how to arrange flowers and make sprays. They did.

McAULEY: Wonderful, so her three jobs that you described working at the courthouse, working for the newspaper, and beginning the floral shop, were all essentially during the depression, the 1930s before World War II?

McNEILL: Yes. She had her car stolen in Rosenberg one time. I think it was a 1936 Ford, if I'm not mistaken. She left the keys in it and when she came back it was gone, but they found it (both chuckle).

McAULEY: Tell me something about the families that lived near you.

McNEILL: The house where Dr. Nichols lived when I was born belonged to a lady called Sally Vanslyke. Then he built himself a house. Then Joe and Lena Blasdell lived there for quite a while with their three children. Before that there was Rusk Rhone and his wife and they had one daughter, Mary Louise. We were friends. Oh my, her mother would give her a stick of gum everyday after she ate her lunch. Mary Louise would come out to the fence, tear the gum in half and give me half of it. When they moved away from there, my mother had to lock the door to keep me in the house. I was so sad, I didn't want her to leave. They lived in another place and then they lived in Missouri City. I always kept up with Mary Louise if I could.

McAULEY: Do you remember anything about where your family shopped?

McNEILL: Yes, I do. Daddy being in the post office and mother having a business, they shopped with everybody. During WW II there were seven grocery stores in the two blocks of downtown Richmond and they shopped at all of them. I would go in a store and get something and say, "Charge it to my Daddy." But it couldn't be over a dollar. If it was over a dollar I had to go to the post office and get him and say, "Daddy there is something down here I want and they won't let me charge it." He would usually go get it, whatever it was.

I could go in any of those grocery stores and buy candy. I'd buy a sack of penny candy or a pickle or I don't know what. Back then you picked up the phone every day, you'd call your grocery store and you told them what you wanted and they delivered it to your house, brought it in your kitchen. You had fresh food every day. I knew all the grocers.

McAULEY: What ages were you during the time your father was serving as postmaster?

McNEILL: He was postmaster for 25 years and then retired. I can't remember how old I was when he worked in the post office first. Then he became postmaster and I remember going to the back door of the post office. There was an old man in town that delivered packages in a wagon drawn by horses and everybody called him Uncle Johnny. When I was real young I'd ask for a nickel but when I got a little older I'd ask for a dime. Uncle Johnny would say, "Here comes give-me-a-nickel. Here come give-me-a-dime." (joyful laughter).

McAULEY: What other business do you recall between the post office and the grocery stores?

McNEILL: The pharmacy was next door to the post office. Mr. Birdwell ran the pharmacy. Later on I worked there. Then there was Mr. Muller in the second block for a while. He had two daughters and we were good friends. Back then mother would call Miss Muller and ask, "Can Lida come over and spend the day with Nancy and Paula?" I would go over and we'd play all day long. You kind of made an appointment to do that.

McAULEY: Do you remember anything about what your family did for entertainment in your youth?

McNEILL: We used to go to Galveston when I was real young and they would usually let me ask somebody to go with me. We would go late in the afternoons so we wouldn't get sun burned so badly. Mother and Daddy would go in the water, too. We usually went to Murdoch's where they had a lot of souvenirs and things. It was shady to swim by Murdoch's and you could even go underneath it. You couldn't drink the water in Galveston; it was horrific. Daddy would get jars and fill them with ice and wrap them with newspaper, wrap string around them to hold them and make his own thermal bottle and take water with us. You couldn't drink Galveston water or Houston for that matter. Their water was horrible!

McAULEY: Do you recall how long it took you to drive to Galveston in those days?

McNEILL: I have no idea. We were probably playing games in the back seat!

McAULEY: What about church? Was your family active in a church?

McNeill: The First Baptist Church. My daddy was Presbyterian but they didn't have a Presbyterian church here so he went to the Baptist church. It was right out the back door practically. Mother didn't get to go to church that much. She did early on, but when she became a florist she had a funeral every Sunday. The black people always liked their funerals on Sunday. So she was busy making funeral flowers. The black people liked ribbon that had gold letters glued to them. They would say, "Mama Dear," "Mother Dear" or "Grandmother" on the ribbon. That took a while to do and I helped some.

McAULEY: You mentioned the business model of grocery stores delivering. Did you mom's business deliver these arrangements to cemeteries and funerals?

McNEILL: Oh, yes. I delivered a lot of flowers when I was able to drive and of course I loved it because you'll do anything when you learn to drive, to get to drive. I used to deliver flowers a lot especially on Easter. A florist's biggest days are Christmas, Valentines, Easter and Mother's Day. Those are the big days for a flower shop and you are busy, busy. If there was a funeral they had *beau coup* flowers. Everybody sent flowers, they don't so much now but they did then.

McAULEY: You mentioned the black community using your mom's business for funerals.

McNEILL: Yes, one of my mother's best customer was the undertaker who was a lady, named Arizona Fleming. She owned the funeral home.

McAULEY: Let's talk a little bit about your schooling. What can you remember about the school you attended, specific classmates or teachers?

McNEILL: I lived so close to the schools that I could walk. One of them was the grammar school which was actually a block away. Since I'm a night person I was usually late every day. My friend, Jane Leichtenheimer and I started school together in the first grade.

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Jane's interview on the FBC Historical Commission website at <http://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=41120>

The first grade was in a separate building. When you went into the second grade you were in the regular school building, but the first grade started in the long white building which is still in Richmond over on Collins Street.

It's owned by the Schultze family; Kenneth Schultze who fixes TVs and sells appliances. I am not sure if I remember the first grade teacher's name, it could have been Miss Childes. The second grade teacher was Miss Kelly. I had a teacher named Myrtle Davis and I had a teacher named Miss Bell. Some of those teachers taught generations. There was a teacher name Margaret Steed who married a local man, Mannford Williams, and we had a teacher named Miss Fanny, who was kin to Mrs. Bender, the fire chief's wife. Then there was a coach that taught in the eight grade, I can't remember his name right off, but I can see what he looks like. We had a principle named Miss West.

When we went to school we RESPECTED those teachers. We didn't talk ugly to them and we didn't talk back; we didn't dare. I remember Miss Bell was a little short lady who wore glasses. She had real blue eyes and was the sweetest little thing. She lived over on Austin Street and she would almost run to school. Her mother sewed for people and she made us a pant suit each. Think I had a blue one and her daughter had a green one. We decided one time that we wanted to play leap frog so we wore those pant suits to school and at recess we got out there and we were playing leap frog and Miss Bell saw us. Man, she came running (in a high pitched voice), "Oh no, no, no girls, noooo, noooo. You can't do that. You can't. Noooo, I don't want to see you do that." So we couldn't play leap frog (laughing).

McAULEY: What other activities do you remember from school?

McNEILL: We did everything, Dorothy Bell and I; we played marbles, hopscotch, jump rope, and football. I could kick a football better than any of the boys. We played with the boys at recess. There was a big tree, it's still over there, that was the base and we had to catch the boys and get them to that base. It was hard to get the boys to the base but there is a picture of me in one of the school albums in a dress with cowboy boots on pulling a boy by the ear. That's how I got mine to the base. You could twist their ear and they would come 'cause it hurt (gleeful laughter).

McAULEY: Where did you go after grammar school?

McNEILL: I graduated in the last graduating class of Richmond High School. It had already become Lamar Consolidated, but they weren't consolidated until after we graduated. Then they tore the high school down. It was about to fall down when we were in it (laughing). I started in the band when I was still in grammar school. They let me practice with the marching band because they needed members. It wasn't real big.

I was in that band until I got out of school. I loved every minute of it because I loved music. I wish we had a choir but we didn't. I played a saxophone for all those years and I got to march with the big band.

When I was much younger there was a May Fête every year. We started practicing in April and the May Fête of course was May the first, which was my birthday. One year Dorothy and I tried to get out of it. We decided, "Let's don't be in the May Fête this year, let's just go watch it." Well the teacher said, "Now you girls are going to have to be in the May Fête." So we didn't get to stay out that year. We had to be in it (chuckling). It was fun because you got to play a lot toward the end of school. Because you had to go practice all the time.

When I was very small we lived in a big old two story house. I barely remember it. I can remember I was about five years old and we had little kiddie cars. They called them kiddie cars and you powered them with your feet. I am not sure if I actually remember that or I just remember being told about it a lot. Anyway that house was so far off the ground you could sit under it. Of course, I crawled under there and played in the sand all the time.

At one point some people moved in there and they had twin girls. I don't know how much older they were than me but I just thought they were wonderful. They looked just alike, they had long curls like Shirley Temple. Their names were Ada Rae and Etta Fae or something like that. It might have been the opposite. Anyway, I just thought those girls were something. They came out one day right before the May Fête. The ladies were there decorating for the May Fête and they were going down there to see what was going on. I decided I wanted to go down there to. I started following them all the way to the corner and then they stopped me and I said, "I want to go, too." They said, "You have to go back home and get permission to go with us."

My sister and brother happened to be watching over me that day. I don't know where my brother was. My sister was taking a bath. I went back and knocked on the bathroom door and I said, "The twins are going to the school to watch them decorate and I want to go with them." She said, "No, I don't want you to go, don't go." She was in the bathtub so I went back to the corner and said, "Yes, I can go." They took me and when we got to the school grounds I had two aunts helping decorate, Aunt Lida and Aunt Lizzie. I went and spoke to them and so the girls knew that those ladies were my aunts.

We walked around to the side of the high school where there was a fire escape. There were some boys up at the top of it and there was some broken glass up there and they were sliding it down the fire escape. When the slide came to an end it didn't end. The metal that it was made out of went on like a sidewalk a little bit further. The twins were standing on either side of me and I was in the middle. The boys threw a piece of glass down and it hit me between my toes and split my foot open. I was bleeding like a stuck hog! One twin went to get the aunts and I knew she was going so I ran around the side to the front of the school and hid behind a bush, because I didn't want them to take me to the doctor. Well, the other twin followed me, so they found me.

Aunt Lizzie had her car across the street in a driveway. They put me in the car, Aunt Lida and Aunt Lizzie put newspaper on the floor because I was dripping blood and they took me downtown to Doctor Nichols up over the post office. Then they got Daddy and he came up and stayed up there with me while Doctor Nichols sewed my toe up. The next day was my birthday. Aunt Lizzie went in the drug store and bought me a big bottle of sour balls they were really popular back then. Oh, man, I thought I had hit the jack pot. Of course my foot was all bandaged up and they took me home and I got in bed and the next day Daddy carried me to the May Fête. I couldn't walk. The next day I was six years old. I'll never forget that story.

They used to have plays at the high school. Daddy loved plays and theater and so he would take me because mother was working in the flower shop. Daddy would take me to the movies because mother didn't care for the movies. He'd come out in front and I would be down the block somewhere playing and he would whistle real loud. I'd run home and go to the movies.

I had a lot of relatives in Wharton. One of my aunts and uncles lived there. He was a banker and they got fairly wealthy and they had a daughter two years older than I was that I just adored. They would invite me in the summer to come over and spend the weekend. Uncle Louie would pull out his money and hand me a dollar and say, "Here, Lida, you can go to the movie." I used to laugh up my sleeve and say, "You ought to give that to your own daughter because I bet I go to the movies more than she does." I went every other day with daddy.

McAULEY: Where was the theater when you went to see the movies?

McNEILL: It was in the middle of the second block on Morton Street. I think they have turned it into a theater. I don't think they are using it now, but it belonged to Richard Joseph. He had the store next to it. Josephs was one of the Grocery stores.

All the kids in town went to the movies on Saturday and when I was fourteen years old my friend and I had dates to go to the movie. After the movies we made those boys play cowboys. We loved to play cowboys and we made them play cowboys with us. We had pistols that looked real, cap pistols. You know back then you could play all over town. You didn't have to worry. We didn't even have to lock our doors. Kids could just go out and walk and play and skate and ride your bicycle and not have to be afraid of anything. There wasn't that much traffic. Now you'll get run over if you rode your bicycle like we did.

McAULEY: You mentioned being in the last class of Richmond High School. What year was that?

McNEILL: The last class was 1948. When I first went in the band there was a Mr. Hogue. I can see him now. He was a wonderful band director and we used to have high school reunions every year. I don't remember when they started but they went for quite a few years. He came to some of those. That was the first band director I remember. Then there was a lady that was a band director one time. She had a sister that was a teacher. There weren't any places to live, so those two ladies rented a room in a house across the street from us. Mother made an apartment in our house that we rented to people. We lived there and we had people that rented the apartment and everybody used one bathroom. I only remember one time having a problem. I had somewhere I had to go and daddy had come home from work and gone in the bathroom. He stayed and stayed and stayed. Finally I told mother, "Daddy has got to get out of that bathroom. I have got to get dressed." So she went to the door and told him hurry up and come out of there, "Lida has got to go somewhere."

McAULEY: Do you have a favorite or most vivid memory about those early days in Richmond, during your youth? Is there something that happened? An event or something in your family that just really resonates with you about that time?

McNEILL: My daddy liked to work with wood and he made Adirondack lawn chairs. He made us some lawn chairs and people sat out in their yards back then. You saw people all the time, everybody walked, not everybody had a car. There was nothing to do so people rode around late in the evenings.

Or they would ride down town on Saturday and watched the people that came from the country to buy their groceries. We'd watch them go up and down the streets and we would go to Rosenberg and sit at the Depot and watch the trains come in; little children loved to go see that. Anyway, daddy made these lawn chairs and other people saw them and they wanted some so he was making lawn chairs for other people in town.

Then he made me a horse that was about this long and it had a long board and he made a little wooden seat on it where you could sit and it had a horse head. It had the little handles to hold on either side of the head. It had a big spring in the back and you could bounce up and down on it. I don't know anybody else that ever had a horse like that, but I had one. Then he made stilts for me and it was just a pole with a block on it that was slanted. I just loved that. I had a real good friend that lived around the corner and he made her some stilts. We used to walk back and forth to our houses and everywhere on those stilts. We had the best time doing that.

We skated, we read comic books and we didn't know anything about air conditioning and sometimes I wish we never found it because we didn't know the difference. You sat out in the yard until time to go to bed because it was cooler. Then you had an electric fan. Everybody in town knew everybody! Now I can go to the grocery store and be there for an hour or two and never see a soul I know.

McAULEY: Did your family keep any kind of a garden?

McNEILL: One time daddy planted a little bit. We had some grapes on the fence, those little bitty grapes, but they were good. We had a palm tree. There was a lot between our house and the Baptist Church. They let daddy use it, there was nothing on it at the time. Daddy planted peanuts over there. He might have planted some other vegetables but when I was very young I was a very picky eater and there wasn't very much I liked. What I liked then and what I like now were hamburgers, fried chicken, rice and gravy and asparagus. My aunt planted asparagus one time so I could have some fresh asparagus. I didn't like salad and I would not touch cabbage or squash. UGH! NO (with great distain)! I love it all now, but I didn't like anything then. Sandwiches, potato chips, ice-cream, soda pop!

Doctor Nichols had two daughters. One of them still lives here; the youngest one. I didn't like milk, I never drank it. One time when I was real small, I drank some milk that had a lump of butter in it. I couldn't stand anything with a lump in it. I didn't eat pie, or pudding, and I didn't eat anything that was supposed to be smooth like mashed potatoes.

Anything that could have a lump in it, don't give it to me. So I would never drink milk. Doctor Nichols' daughter, Marilyn, I thought, "Oh, I know that Marilyn is probably real healthy 'cause she's the doctors daughter." So I would get a little juice glass and put milk in it and sit on the back steps and hold my nose and try to drink that milk so I would be healthy like Marilyn Nichols (laughing). I ate a lot of cereal but I only put enough milk to be able to eat it, no extra.

McAULEY: Did your family keep any animals or pets?

McNEILL: I always loved dogs or kittens and I was always dragging puppies home, then you didn't have them in the house. Hardly anybody had them in the house. There was a lady in town that had a little dog and she'd sit on her porch with that dog on her lap and we thought she was weird. That dog was in the house. She didn't have any children and she was at home by herself a lot so she had this little dog. Most people had their dogs outside. My friend Dorothy and I would ride our bicycles around everywhere. A lot of black people had dogs and they would have puppies. If we rode by some house and we saw puppies we'd immediately go over there and ask them if we could have a puppy. Sometimes they weren't old enough to take yet but they would say yes and we could come back and get them. We'd pick out the puppy we wanted and when they were old enough we'd go back and get it. Most of the time her mother wouldn't let her keep her puppy. A lot of times I ended up with two puppies.

At one time we had some rabbits in the back yard and a dog, a cat or some kittens, a canary, one of those little bitty turtles that were so popular – you could buy them in Galveston and their backs were painted with something or it said, "Galveston, Texas" on it. We had all those animals and, of course, daddy fed them all. He took care of all of them. The prison farm came into town in a wagon with horses. The trustee would bring the mail to the post office and they would bring things to daddy. They brought a rabbit one time for him to eat. He wasn't going to eat that rabbit so he built a cage. I guess they brought him another rabbit and first thing you know we had cages all over the back yard and rabbits everywhere. They were pretty bad when they were grown but when they were little bunnies they were darling. I would take them out in the yard and play with them. I won the canary at the fair. When the fair came every year, it lasted four days and every night we went to the fair. Daddy loved to play bingo, so he'd play and I'd play and I won the canary.

McAULEY: You mentioned some of the changes in your life time; that you go to grocery stores now and don't see people that you know. Reflect a little bit on some of these changes; ones that you think are good for Richmond and maybe ones that you aren't so happy about.

McNEILL: I don't know any changes that are good for Richmond. There are too many people. I loved our little town where you knew everybody and everybody knew you. Nobody that moved to Richmond had to be told don't talk about anybody because everybody in Richmond was related in some way. I don't like to see it grown like it is and all the traffic that's here. It was the best little town to grow up in. As far as I'm concerned it was the best time in the world. Of course, we had the depression and WWII but it didn't affect kids that much. We went on with our lives.

McAULEY: When you are traveling through Richmond today are there buildings or streets or parts of town that help you be nostalgic about your youth?

McNEILL: Yes, yes there are. We had beautiful homes all down the highway. There weren't any businesses after you got across the bridge. There was a funeral home that was a business there but it was a pretty place and the people lived there. It was a beautiful town unlike a lot of towns that just had businesses all through it. Richmond was pretty and had these beautiful trees over the highway. The highway was built up high. That's another thing I don't like that they do today; they cut all the highways. That's why Houston floods every time it rains. They cut the highways down low and think the water is going to run off in those things and it can't run off fast enough. Now what kind of engineers did that?

I asked an engineer from Houston one time, "Why in the world are you cutting down all the roads? Don't you know that's why it's flooding so badly? You do away with the ditches that held the water, you lower the roads and it floods every time it rains." Well he told me the stupidest thing I ever heard. It was something about the water level and it made absolutely no sense. Back then you had to climb UP to go across the highway. Every September I got a pair of cowboy boots; I loved them. I was going to town and we had ice on the road. I couldn't hardly get up on the highway to cross it and I had to get on my hands and climb up on the highway to get across and everybody in the courthouse was looking out the window watching me. They told me later, "We saw you trying to climb on the highway." We had fun.

Uncle Johnny with the horse and wagon every year didn't have a lot of money or anything. Every year he had a big picnic for all the kids in town. He would get another wagon so he could get them all on there and everybody would meet at the Methodist Church and then they would all get on the those wagons, pile up and he would take them out across the bridge. There was some property out there that has houses on it now but then it didn't have anything and he would take us out there. One time he took us to the Catholic Church grounds. He would take us out there and we'd get ice cream and cookies and a favor of some sort; some kind of toy a little whistle or something he gave all the kids. Any kid that could come, could go and do that. Every year he did that. I guess he saved up his money. He delivered packages on that wagon. If he came by your house we'd run out and jump on the wagon and ride with him and sometime he would let us take the reins!

When I was really young, we had ice boxes. We didn't have a refrigerator, we had an ice box, and the ice man came and you got a big block of ice. We would follow the ice wagon down the road and chip out pieces of ice and eat them. That was the best ice! Same thing with cotton wagons. The cotton farmers would get a big bunch of cotton on their wagon and they would come to the gin. We had a gin here and they would come down my street. We would get behind it and pull bits of cotton off and we would bring it back sit on the steps and pull the cotton off the seed and have a big ball of cotton. Just fun things that kids did then. The kids now are in the house watching that tube or working on these stupid computers that I hate with a purple passion. They're too time consuming, you can do everything faster with a pencil and paper.

McAULEY: As you got older what was your work life?

McNEILL: I never wanted to go to college. I never intended to go to college and neither did my friend Dorothy. One day there were a lot of the kids who were graduating and going to colleges. One day we said, "Hey, what are we going to do when we get out of school, when we graduate? What are we going to do?" Before then girls just wanted to get married and get on with their lives. Everybody was going to college so we said, "Hey, I guess we better go to college." There were a lot of the kids going to Huntsville so we told our parents that we wanted to go to school in Huntsville. So they signed us up. I just had a ball, but I didn't go to classes. I went to very few classes so by the end of December I went back to school because I didn't want to tell my parents that I couldn't go back. I think I stayed there at least two weeks before I called my mother and said, "You're going to have to come get me." (chuckles)

I loved meeting all those people and there was a hot dog stand down the hill not far from our dorm. Best hot dogs you ever had in your life for twenty-five cents. I'd eat two of them; they were great. Bends is the name of the place. We cooked breakfast in our rooms, which we weren't supposed to do, but we did it. When I came home from Huntsville in January, that winter and spring was the loneliest time I could remember. I cried and cried because nobody was here; they had all gone to college. I had one friend here but I think she got married pretty early. I could get together with her and there were other people I knew.

Where did I work first? I remember one summer I worked at the courthouse for two weeks. Then I worked for a dentist in town for maybe a whole summer. That might have been the summer before I went college. Then I went to work at the drug store. I think Mr. Fields owned it. Both Jane Leightenheimer and I worked there and there was another little lady that worked there. He was really looking for a boy or a man to work and I came along so he gave me the job. I worked there nine months and then I went to work at the hospital. I worked there until I moved to Fort Worth. I lived in Fort Worth for a couple of years and then I moved to Houston and stayed there until I got married. I didn't get married until I was thirty-nine and then I hated to lose my freedom.

McAULEY: Where was the pharmacy located?

McNEILL: Next door to the post office right there on Morton Street. I went to junior college a year in Wharton before I started working at the pharmacy. Another friend of mine was a little younger and she went also. We had a bus that picked us up and took us over to Wharton. We smoked but I never would smoke in front of my daddy, because my mother and daddy didn't smoke. That's a bad thing because if you smoke when you walk in the house they smell it. My mother told me that she wasn't going to tell me not to smoke but she would like for me to wait until I was eighteen. We were on our senior trip when I turned eighteen. So I got a boy to go buy me a package of cigarettes and I started smoking. "I can smoke now, I'm eighteen." I quit smoking when I was in my thirties; I got so sick of it. Every morning you had that awful taste in your mouth. I would go down to the drug store and I would buy cigarettes and I would have them charge it as gum or a magazine so daddy wasn't paying for cigarettes. A package of cigarettes could last me a week or more. I didn't smoke that much.

The post master before my daddy was Mr. Matt Newel. His wife was a piano teacher the sweetest lady in this world I loved her. They had this big old fashion house on the highway on the corner of Fifth Street. When they built the old houses they didn't build the kitchen onto the house. This house had a kitchen out back. They had built a kind of a hall way from the house to the kitchen and that lady had a granddaughter that lived there quite a bit and a grandson. He was older but the granddaughter was my age and could play the piano really well. She ended up being a teacher for a while and married a doctor. Her name was Florence and she was named after her grandmother. They were both Florence but they called their grandmother "Bye", so we called her "Bye", too. I took piano for about two years and I can't play a note now. I didn't want to practice.

We had a piano at our house. My mother got it in Wharton. It had been her piano; an old upright piano. Mother had a lot of black customers. The black school was in Rosenberg, the high school and the grammar school, too. The superintendent of the school would come in the shop to order flowers and he would see that piano. "Do you want to sell that? The school needs a piano; I'd sure love to buy that piano." Mother would tell me, "If you don't practice, I am going to sell that piano." She kept saying that and I thought, "Oh, good, so I didn't practice." And she sold that piano to the school (laughter).

McAULEY: Is there a story or a building or an event of some kind that you can remember from those days in the thirties and forties that you would like to reflect on or share?

McNEILL: Oh, I used to come over to the Moore home and go on the porch every afternoon. The porch is flat and it came around the side. Johnny Moore, the son, built it flat for dancing because they had parties and they wanted to dance. Grandpa would sit out there on that part of the porch in a big old rocking chair. Lots of times I'd come over and visit or mother would come over and he would let me go down in that storm cellar. I was a little bit afraid because I thought, "Oh, if I find a snake down here, aghah!" A friend of mine, the girl that walked on stilts, Dorothy Ann Wendt, was a very talented girl and we were real good friends. Her sister was a teacher for a while.

McAULEY: To make it clear for the transcription, when you mention grandpa at the Moore home, who are we talking about?

McNEILL: Mr. Moore, the Congressman, the first Mr. Moore, John M. Moore. He usually had a hat on and he wore a suit and tie. He would sit out there on the veranda with a suit and tie. Mother said when I was real little, I'd go over and climb up in his lap and fool with his tie, you know pull on his tie. I don't remember that but she told me that.

There were trees planted outside the side walk all the way around this block. We skated around this block a lot. These were camphor trees and you could get a root and down at the bottom and it tasted kind of like root beer if you chewed on it. We climbed in those trees. I wish some of those trees were still there. There was a tree over here and there was tree over on that side close to where the wash room was then. It wasn't where it is now. It was back where that cottage is. We would climb up in those trees. People walked all the time and people would walk under us. (whispering) They don't know we're up here watching them. We had lots of little secrets that went on.

I had a bicycle that I enjoyed so much. I'd wreck it and it would need fixing and there was a man on the corner from where we lived on the next street, he could fix the bicycle. One night we went to the movie and I rode my bike and Jane sat on the handle bars. Well, coming back from the movie we were on the courthouse sidewalk and there were some steps at the end over there. I was just going to ride by... I don't know what happened but she went flying off the bike and the bicycle and I went flying and the bicycle was just twisted up. Some neighbor came along and picked her up and took her home. Daddy was behind us and he picked up the bicycle and drug it home. We were skinned up but Mr. Skinner fixed that bike. I didn't get it until I was nine years old and I wanted one when I was six and I thought I would die until I got it. I was a puny, skinny little kid. They didn't want me to have one that early so when I was nine.

I got the bicycle at Christmas and it rained all day long. I rode that bike and enjoyed it so much until I was fifteen and then we had a maid and a cook and she had a daughter and I sold that bicycle to Rose (chuckle). We got a lot of use out of that bicycle. Kids today have bicycles on top of bicycles. We got one bicycle.

McAULEY: Well, I want to thank you for coming out to talk to us today. Your stories were wonderful.

McNEILL: You are welcome.

Interview ends