FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees:	**Lois and Clarence McLemore**
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Transcript

WIDMEYER: Was your family originally from Sugar Land?

CLARENCE: My mother and father were actually from East Texas, near Tyler. After the war, he came here in 1945. So we move down in '45. It was one sister, one brother and myself. And my sister, Sonya, was born right here.

WIDMEYER: How old were you?

CLARENCE: I was six.

WIDMEYER: Where did you live when you first came to Sugar Land? In Mayfield?

CLARENCE: Yeah, it was here. We lived on Avenue C, which is probably two streets south of where I live right now. We lived there in one of the company houses. My father worked for the sugar company so we lived right there.

WIDMEYER: What did he do for the company?

CLARENCE: He worked at the dunk. It was called the dunk. It was where they physically unloaded 150 pound sacks of raw sugar that came in from Galveston. So he worked on the dunk. Mostly everybody that was colored worked on the dunk.

WIDMEYER: He came from Tyler for the job?

CLARENCE: Yes, after he got out of the army there wasn't really anything to do in East Texas. So he came down here for some reason and they hired him at the sugar company.

WIDMEYER: What was it like as a child? What do you remember?

CLARENCE: Well, it was just like any other small, small community. There wasn't anything to do except play. People have to understand about this type of community that we had. It was like a plantation community. Everything was self-contained, everything was provided, you lived here in Sugar Land if you worked for the company. If you didn't work for the company, you couldn't live here. We had cheap housing and water was free. There was no sanitation or anything. But we was just like any other kid, free run about. It was very safe. We only had one constable, Curtis Hall. He never packed a gun or anything. We just kind of lived freely.

WIDMEYER: How many black men worked at Imperial at that time?

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CLARENCE: I would estimate it was maybe 60 or 70 men.

WIDMEYER: And they all resided in Sugar Land?

CLARENCE: That's right, they resided in Sugar Land. Some who lived in Eagle Lake and other places like Spanish Camp, but the majority of people who worked in their refinery lived here, the black men did.

WIDMEYER: I imagine they thought they were pretty fortunate?

CLARENCE: Oh, hey, this was a great place. This was a place where the company took care of everything; you didn't have to worry about credit. You had free credit. And we also had script money. You know what script money is? That's money that the company actually issues you, you go to the credit [union] and they would give you this coupon book, and it had money in it Green coupon for dollars on down to one penny. And you could borrow up to as much as $50.00. So they were never broke here! And they just deducted it from their paycheck.

WIDMEYER: It was segregated at that time. So your playmates were mostly black kids?

CLARENCE: Yeah, Hispanics and we live together here but we never did really associate. No, all of my childhood friends were all black, always.

WIDMEYER: What was the school like?

CLARENCE: It was like a village. You have to understand about the black culture. What happens is that everybody is responsible for you. Aunt Nanny, Aunt Fanny on the corner was just as much as a part of rearing you as anybody else. And if you got out of line you could be bamboozled by her, actually slam dunked. And we had corporal punishment, of course, always. We say severely, but we didn't call that abuse, when you were spanked. It was just the way of discipline. It's just the way it was.

We knew everybody's name everybody was concerned about our welfare. I mean, truly concerned. So when we went to school if you got a disciplinary action against you at school, well, then you had a note sent home and you could be spanked again. When I say corporal punishment, I'm not talking about the paddle. I'm talking about a lady who had, you remember the old sewing machines that had the pedal in it? And it had a leather strap in it? My ninth grade teacher where we were, she had that thing wrapped around her wrist. It was about that long. Oh, C.P.S., she'd have been in the jail these days. And she actually would whip you. It was not like a spanking, you were actually whipped.

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Because I remember a couple of times, I didn't get my division right and she would come across your shoulder with it. But it was normal. That was a normal way of doing things. They were preparing us for our way of life and they were not at all concerned about your personal attitude about it (laughs).

WIDMEYER: We had to hold our hands out and get the ruler.

CLARENCE: No, there wasn't anything like that. If I'd a got a ruler in my hand, I'd probably have been worse off than what I was. That wasn't punishment. I'd probably put out both hands. (laughs)

WIDMEYER: When you went into high school, what year would that have been?

CLARENCE: That would have had to have been four years prior to 1959, which was what, '55?

WIDMEYER: So the Supreme Court in 1954 rules that segregation is illegal. What impact did that have here?

CLARENCE: None. Had no impact at all. We actually, probably, realistically, weren't integrated in 1965. M.R. Woods was the colored school until 1965 when the students then were transferred to Dulles. But still, the community was not probably integrated until 1970, when we could go into restaurants and go in different areas of the theater.

WIDMEYER: I wanted to ask you about the Palms Theater. And the restaurants.

CLARENCE: The Palms Theater came here in about 1949. Cole Theater, which was the owner, they came and they built the first theater over here. They owned the theater in Rosenberg and, I think, and one in Wharton too. The bottom floor was for the whites. Middle floor section, which was like balcony, section was for the Mexicans. And the top tier was for us. I remember Mr. Morten always had to keep us in line because we were throwing stuff over on the Mexicans. (laughs)

WIDMEYER: He was the manager?

CLARENCE: Yeah, right. (laughs)

WIDMEYER: You used to throw stuff at the Mexicans?

CLARENCE: Of course! (laughs) (all laugh)

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WIDMEYER: I want to go back just a few years and talk about the house that you lived in as a boy. You said that the privy was in the back?

CLARENCE: Yeah, that privy was in the back. Everybody had a privy. Ours was in the back and we had a four-room house. There is one over here on Pine Street; I think it is a duplicate of it. You had the living room, you had one bedroom, you had the kitchen behind a living room and you had a small, little bedroom in the back. And you had a porch. No inside water. The front porch had water; it was out on the front porch on a banister. And the back porch was right behind the back door, where you'd reach out and get the water to do your cooking.

WIDMEYER: So that little bedroom, it had three kids in it?

CLARENCE: It had four actually. We had two stepchildren. Let me go back a little bit. We came in 1945 then we had to go back to Tyler and then we were shipped back here again in 1949. This house had myself, my sister, two other children, which is four and two other teenage children, which was her children. And we had a fold down couch in the front room for the two older kids. I don't know if you remember the type of couch that you would pull it up and the bottom would just kind of break back and make two pieces?

WIDMEYER: Did you all get along?

CLARENCE: Well, yes we did. You do get along when the facilities demand it. If it's tight you just learn to make do, actually.

WIDMEYER: Food, was there always enough to go around?

CLARENCE: Oh, always enough food here in Sugar Land because we had access to all the Industries. We had a supermarket, we had a general mercantile store, we had all the vegetables and the beef and everything was raised right here. The Industry supplied everything for the community right there in the store. They would butcher, put it in the supermarket and we'd buy it. It was very, very sufficient, very self-sustaining, self contained. We didn't have to go anywhere for anything except well not even clothes. In fact we were even discouraged about going to Sears and buying clothes over at the dry goods center.

WIDMEYER: Did you go in to Houston much?

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CLARENCE: Some of the more prominent people here in the community would go to Montgomery Wards and Sears. In every little village like this you always had the prominent people, the people who progress a little better than others. Their kids dress a little bit better, we might have Sugar Land Drygoods clothes but they had SEARS clothes. People did go to town for really good clothes, for suits and hats and things like that.

WIDMEYER: Did y'all have an automobile?

CLARENCE: My dad, yeah he had in 1940 convertible ford. Everybody had basically a car. (laughs) because Sugar Land had Sugarland Motor (laughs) Sugarland and Chevrolet Motors was one of the first places I changed a tire. They had everything.

WIDMEYER: They financed the cars, too?

CLARENCE: Yes yes everything was financed. We had Sugar Land State Bank. So everything was right here for you.

WIDMEYER: So it was an all black school and elementary through high school?

CLARENCE: Elementary was on the West end and it went all the way up to the bathrooms, that was the deciding point. From the bathrooms forward was high school. There were a total of 350 children in total. The reason we had that many kids is because once they built the school in 1954-5 all the surrounding areas were brought in to here Four Corners, which is north of here, Arclola, Stafford, Missouri City Allief, all of them were bused in the here. All the black kids were bused in.

WIDMEYER: The Richmond Rosenberg that area?

CLARENCE: They were in Lamar Consolidated. I'm saying colored, so would be exactly like it was. The colored kids went to A.W. Jackson in Rosenberg.

WIDMEYER: Did you play sports in high school?

CLARENCE: Yeah I tried to play football but I was about 147 pounds at the time. The little guys, they made them quarterbacks and stuff like that. I just got hit one time running an 80 up the middle and I got in the band that same day. (laughs)

WIDMEYER: So what sports did you like?

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CLARENCE: I didn't really like any of them. Even today I'm not an enthusiast of any sport. I played in band totally and completely the time I was in high school. I played the French horn and the E flat horn in the marching band. And I played saxophone in the dance band.

WIDMEYER: In the dance band? So you had dances?

CLARENCE: Yeah we had dances. In fact, Stevie Wonder came here when he was a little kid. Little Stevie Wonder. They got us all assembled one morning, told us Stevie Wonder was coming. We had an auditorium and we packed it and we saw little Stevie Wonder and his harmonica. The auditorium was a big white wooden structure that sat there right on campus. We had five buildings, this was before the main school was built, we had a big white building, which was the main building where the high school students were. We had an adjacent building, an AG building and then the auditorium which also was fifth and seventh grade. They had sliding doors and in the middle and you just slide the doors back and everybody would turn around and their seat, and that was the stage (laughs) And little Stevie Wonder…. [mimics rocking his head to music]

WIDMEYER: Who are the famous people who came?

CLARENCE: Big Willie Mae Bell Thornton came. Johnnie Taylor came. See, in this area all of the singers had to do the all the black areas. They did the county fair and you could see them for 13¢. They were just trying to get started. They made all of the small places. At that particular time, blacks could only play to blacks. There was no white audience at all, none. So they had to do Houston, which is the major club or the Grill or something like that. If they were going to get the crowd they had to do the County Fair, which was strictly, that night, blacks only.

WIDMEYER: So you're in high school. What kind of courses did you take? Did you know what you wanted to do after school?

CLARENCE: It was not really a part of your psyche to think that you are going to actually really do anything. We had general education. In high school we had what they called basic math, we never had anything like, I think the only thing we had that was not basic math was geometry. We didn't have Algebra, no trigonometry and of course English, social studies home economics, Ag and music, which was choir, choral. And that was about it. I'd never seen an algebra book in my life.

WIDMEYER: You graduated?

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CLARENCE: Yeah, I graduated.

WIDMEYER: Was it just a given that you go to work for Imperial?

CLARENCE: Yes, it was a given that you would go to work labor. The supervisors at Imperial Sugar, those were blue collar people. They lived on Brooks Street and on The Hill and places like that. They were blue collar we were strictly labor.

WIDMEYER: So what did you do?

CLARENCE: After I got out of high school, I was a cook. I worked at a restaurant.

WIDMEYER: Was that Cleburns?

CLARENCE: I didn't work for Cleburns that was our competition. I work for Whites. I started washing dishes at eleven and I moved up to fry cook. I stayed a cook until after I got married. And actually ended up at the Warwick later on. I wasn't a chef but I was like a pastry cook salad cook, stuff like that.

WIDMEYER: You mean the Warwick up in the museum district?

CLARENCE: Yes.

WIDMEYER: Did you work for Imperial?

CLARENCE: No I never did. But I did work, after I got married, I worked for Nalco. I went to Nalco1962. Besides the sugar company that was a big industry here. It was called VISCO then. I was the first black chemical operator at Nalco because of affirmative action.

WIDMEYER: What year?

CLARENCE: 1963.

WIDMEYER: He retired them?

CLARENCE: No, I left for personal reasons. Actually I left because of my religious beliefs. I couldn't work shift work anymore so I had to leave. But I was the first one they made shift operator because of affirmative action.

WIDMEYER: This is a tough question, but as you look at the time since you were born to now, is the community much better now?

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CLARENCE: Everything is much better now. We never were treated in this community like in the South. Most blacks were treated with respect to a point where if you knew your place, you knew we needed to be and you wasn't gonna cause any problems, were you were treated fairly. As fairly as fair was considered. But in 1965 everything changed for us. I remember the first time ... you have to understand we had never, I had never she had never [nodding to his wife], stepped socially in any white house ever. Socially. Never. So I remember the first time I stepped into a guy's house socially, he was white. We went for dinner. And they had cooked some pinto beans and they were half done, they were crunchy. We left the house and I said, "Lois, I wonder if white people eat their beans like their steaks, half rare." (laughs) Because we really didn't know. It's just like if you were to say right now do you know the cultural condition of somebody like Asians. Would you know exactly how they do things in a social setting? No you wouldn't. Because you just don't have that connection. And that's the way that we were.

WIDMEYER: Probably wouldn't take your shoes off.

CLARENCE: Yeah, you walk in because you would know what the culture was, what was expected of you. And that's the way we were. We lived with whites all of our lives but we never socially had ever been sitting together. Ever.

WIDMEYER: Until 1965?

CLARENCE: Well, until 1970. I didn't step in these people's houses until 1972.

WIDMEYER: And nowadays? You have many white friends?

CLARENCE: Oh, we have all white friends. It's a whole lot of different. The concept socially in this country from a black perspective was slavery changed the social order in America. Slavery did. And then the next social order change was the Civil War when blacks were "freed". And the next one was 1965, which was 100 years later. The whole social order of America changed. And the next one was Obama's election. The four major incidents that blacks were a part of the actually social change of America.

WIDMEYER: Obama's election was really---

CLARENCE: Well, apartheid ended on January 20, 2009.

WIDMEYER: Do you remember when Martin Luther King was assassinated?

CLARENCE: Yes.

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WIDMEYER: What was that like here?

CLARENCE: Well, we were basically under the belief that he was exactly what J. Edgar Hoover said he was. And he was a rebel rouser, that he was a troublemaker that he was a communist and ran women and stuff like that. We were under the impression that whatever they said, we respected what they said because they had the information. Of course, like the NAACP said that he was a troublemaker because he was stirring up stuff that he shouldn't be stirring up. So when he got assassinated it was not like it was a big thing other than he was messing with the government and shouldn't have been.

WIDMEYER: What about when Bobby Kennedy was assassinated?

CLARENCE: Bobbie, we had a lot of empathy for that. The Kennedy's was the great hope for black America. They were going to change everything and legislate that we were actually going to come out of Jim Crow.

WIDMEYER: Yeah, he would have made an exception president.

CLARENCE: Yeah, he would have. But he went against the status quo and you don't do that, not in this country per se.

GOODSILL: You said that people had cars, because they can get loans. So there wasn't too much discrimination in terms of loans?

CLARENCE: No it's never been discrimination… if you wanna spend your money with us. That's the natural thing. And we got special rates and special time and things like that it's just like anything else, if you have people working for you, if you're a maid, if you work in the garden, you are a part, and I'm not gonna say words like property, but you were their concern and they made it as comfortable as possible for you as long as you were at that level. Now if you got "uppity" (laughs) then you got right away disciplined. But most black people understood their place and I'm saying it exactly like it is. And Sugar Land was a GOOD place. You could never lose your house. I think a rent was $7.00 a month. There was no water bill. And you could move from house to house. They would repaint it. It was just little bitty things like that that made it comfortable for us. We lived better than anybody in the county. Sugar Land, as blacks, we lived better than anybody.

WIDMEYER: A lot better than people in Acres Homes did at that time.

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CLARENCE: Yeah. Yeah, a lot better the only really upscale black community was Third Ward, which they called Sugar Hill. That was where all the really prominent blacks lived, school teachers and the undertaker's.

WIDMEYER: You mean in Houston? The Riverside area?

CLARENCE: Yeah. We called it the Third Ward. Trey.

WIDMEYER: That became a Jewish neighborhood.

CLARENCE: It was Jewish first. After the white flight to Braeburn and they could make a mint off of, right after the war, 1947 all of a prominent blacks went to the Riverside area. From Old Spanish Trail to the gulf.

WIDMEYER: Yeah. Now, boy, those are expensive homes.

CLARENCE: Oh yeah, the prominent blacks moved back in there. When it went down during the sixties they'd made duplexes out of some of them. All of the big people live there.

WIDMEYER: How about integration?

CLARENCE: We never had any problems. They had a couple demonstrations down at Kresge's. And some areas that had lunch counters. But Mayor Welch and some of the black men and pastors they said, "Look, look they are having all these problem up north and all in the South. So what we're gonna do, is we are going to agree to agree to disagree."

WIDMEYER: Houston was the only major city which never had a race riot.

CLARENCE: That's right. Absolutely. Because the progressive whites here in Houston understood the economic devastation that it was going to cause. So they said OK, if you wanna demonstrate down there at Kresge's for two hours and have a cup of coffee, that's fine with us, there's no problem. So we never had a riot. Never.

WIDMEYER: This is your interview not mine (laughs) but Houston was interesting because there was no zoning. And no zoning kind of integrated Houston a long time before.

CLARENCE: Absolutely right.

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WIDMEYER: Your step-mom bought the first house [in Mayfield Park].

CLARENCE: The first house.

WIDMEYER: I heard once that there was never a foreclosure.

CLARENCE: Never. How could you have a foreclosure when the company owned all of the houses and took it out of your check? The house that she bought was not one of the company houses. This is not a company house.

WIDMEYER: Her house was one of the first Federal Urban Renewal projects.

CLARENCE: Right, that was right because we were fixin' to have interstate commerce and with segregation and stuff Sugar Land wanted to make sure that they weren't red lined. They wanted to make sure that if they were going to give any government subsidies that they were going to have to remove their red line. They're going to have to say, "Look, look what we're doing for those people. Look how we're helping them out." So that the government said, "OK that's fine." [claps as if applauding]. So she got one of the first houses that were built. But the rest of these houses the one that is next door, and the rest of these, these were actually owned by the company. They were called company houses and they let the employees buy for think $15,000.00. And you paid them out in about fifteen years, or something like that.

WIDMEYER: They were fifteen year mortgages?

CLARENCE: Fifteen year mortgages. And you paid it out. And it could not be any foreclosures because it was deducted from your check.

GOODSILL: Nobody ever lost their jobs?

CLARENCE: Nobody that had a house lost their job. If you did lose your job you had to leave. You actually had to be physically removed.

GOODSILL: If you bought your own house, you could keep it if you lost your job?

CLARENCE: Yeah, you can keep it then. But I don't know of anybody who ever lost their homes. Nobody ever lost their job. I remember one night my dad, he was inebriated, in other words he was drunk. (laughs). So any way we were all sleeping, we slept in the same bed me and my dad and my brother. And a supervisor came from the Company about 12:30, knocked down the door, "Mac, get up your late!"

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And so I got up and he said, "You tell your dad to get up he needs to be at work. And he needs to be there by a quarter of one." I woke him up and he got up and left. You didn't lose your job, they just came and got you.

WIDMEYER: Did you know Mr. Eldridge?

CLARENCE: No, I didn't know any of those ... they was way up somewhere. We just heard of Mr. Eldridge and Mr., Kempner and those people but we never saw them. We just saw supervisors and taskmasters! (laughs)

WIDMEYER: What are you doing now for work?

CLARENCE: I went to Brown and Root for about ten years. I was a piping engineer over there after I finished school. Then after I lost my job at Brown and Root in 1982 in the oil bust, then I started a business of my own called the Maids of Sugar Creek. And I had my own company. I still do some now, couple houses now. But I did that from 1982 up until now.

WIDMEYER: What is your college degree in?

CLARENCE: It's an associate's year college degree from University Houston. 1974.

WIDMEYER: So you went to the main campus?

CLARENCE: Yeah. I knew affirmative action was going to be happening. Of course I'd come through Nalco on affirmative action. Then they got on Brown and Root about it and so Brown and Root began hiring everybody who is 98.6 and could speak so they could get under the deal. The war was going on and they needed a lot of minorities to shore up their government responsibilities. I remember my supervisor tell me, "Mac, let me tell you something, you ain't smart enough and your degree, that don't mean nothing. The government says you're gonna be here and you are a token." That's Brown and Root Redneck right there. (laughs) He and I become good friends because I knew exactly where he was coming from. We never had no problem because I knew where I was and he knew where I was and we never had a bigger problem. I'll tell you what I tell them a little joke at orientation I said, "Well all I wanna know is when do I get my watermelon break?" He couldn't help himself, he just about broke out on the floor laughing. (laughs) "Touche'!"

WIDMEYER: When did your parents pass?

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CLARENCE: My mother is still alive at 88. And my daddy died in 1973. My mom lives in Kansas City, Missouri. I'm 70 and Lois (wife) is 69.

GOODSILL: What was it like working in the Char House?

WIDMEYER: It was really bad. There were no respirators, there were no safety factors, any of that. Men would be black from the char. My dad would be overwhelmed with the sugar, the smell, the heat; the heat was just unbelievable. The conditions were horrible.

GOODSILL: But people lived here and that was where they worked.

CLARENCE: This was the best job in the county! So it was OK. It was fine. It was just a matter of condition. Like we had no air conditioning, you just open the south window and you got cold. But now we can hardly manage if the air conditioner off. During Ike we felt like killing people. We used to sleep outside, just dressed appropriately and just went to bed in your shorts and no covers. And actually it's just a matter of acclimatizing your body to the conditions. And it actually worked.

WIDMEYER: Were there any injuries or deaths?

CLARENCE: Harold was the only somebody that was killed. Hal Whitaker, he was the only one killed because he was inside cleaning one of the strippers or something and somebody accidentally turned the machine on. That's the only one. There might have been one of two heart attacks but other than that nobody died. We've only had about two murders here, only two, and they were passion murders.

WIDMEYER: That's what I call a great interview.

McLEMORE, C: I want everybody to know how good a place this is. And how it has always really been a really good place. That's why Sugar Land was recently voted 3rd best place to live in America. We bought this house in 1965. 6 of us lived here. Venetian Estates was just staring. First Colony or Town West were not built. Crime is minimal.

WIDMEYER: Do you have children?

CLARENCE: Yeah, we have four. They are all in Houston. One will be 48 this year. We have a pair of twins who are 44 and the daughter is in between them.

WIDMEYER: So you see them pretty often?

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CLARENCE: Yeah, we see them occasionally. But we've been here in this house since 1965, right here.

GOODSILL: How did it come about?

CLARENCE: It was already built and we just bought it. The Sugar Land houses weren't even built. They had some contractors come in here and build some extra houses. I guess Sugar Land had to do that for some reason.

WIDMEYER: First Colony wasn't there?

CLARENCE: None of that was there. Venetian Estates was just starting, no First Colony, there wasn't even Town West.

GOODSILL: You never considered moving to another place, other than Sugar Land?

CLARENCE: No.

LOIS: We did once.

CLARENCE: Yeah, that's right, we did! When we started working at Brown & Root and were making more money.

LOIS: No, you were working at Nalco. The family was growing so we decided to move. I even went looking for a house. But the kids were teenagers and I said, 'Oh we don't' need to move. We can stay here and raise the kids.' So we decided to stay.

GOODSILL: The six of you lived in this house?

LOIS: Yes.

CLARENCE: One bath!

GOODSILL: How many bedrooms in this house?

CLARENCE: It's three bedrooms, a washroom and one bath, and a garage.

LOIS: We made our garage a dining room.

GOODSILL: REALLY!

CLARENCE: You should go look at it!

GOODSILL: I'd love to.

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WIDMEYER: Where did you live before you moved in here?

CLARENCE: We lived in Arcola. I got my job when I was working with my uncle and then Nalco called me. I had taken a test over there, and they called me to come to work. That's when we started our life. The twins weren't born yet.

WIDMEYER: How did you two meet?

CLARENCE: We met in high school. We started in 5th grade.

LOIS: We met at school. We were high school sweethearts.

CLARENCE: And we started in 5th grade. They brought all of the kids from the surrounding area in to our school. She was in Four Corners, so they brought them around in area. I was sitting in the classroom in 5th grade when they walked in. They smelled like wood and coal oil.

LOIS: (laughing)

GOODSILL: Will you tell us some about growing up in Four Corners? And how far away from Sugar Land that was?

LOIS: Four Corners is about eight miles north of Sugar Land.

WIDMEYER: What's there now?

LOIS: It's built up nice. There are a lot of homes. It's the four corners between ??? and Sugar Land. It is in Fort Bend County. There are a lot of beautiful homes out there.

WIDMEYER: Was that your home when you were a child, Lois?

LOIS: That's where I was raised. My father's name was John Lee Foy and my mother's name was Vera Lee Foy. I was the fourth child of ten children. We all lived in a little four-room house at Four Corners. We had a school out there where we went until the 5th grade. Then all the schools integrated into Sugar Land at M. R. Wood. That's how we came to Sugar Land. At Four Corners we had a teacher named Mrs. Barlow. She integrated up here to Sugar Land.

WIDMEYER: Did your family stay there or did they move to Sugar Land?

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LOIS: They stayed there. We rode the bus from Four Corners to Sugar Land. The roads were REAL rough because they didn't have pavement. We would come every day to school. It was fun!

WIDMEYER: Was that down Highway 6?

CLARENCE: It was coming off of Boss Gaston, off of Highway 6 which is going to be west of Highway 6.

WIDMEYER: What was school like for you?

LOIS: It was fun! We enjoyed it. Like Clarence said, the teachers didn't play with you, they were very strict. They meant for you to get your lessons and if you didn't, they would whip you.

WIDMEYER: Not the girls?! They wouldn't whip the girls.

LOIS: Oh yes they would! You learned real quick to get your lessons. Then if they wanted to, they would send a note home to your parents and you would get another whipping. So you had to be VERY careful and really obey the teachers. Because the teachers and the parents were 'together' and that meant you had to get your lessons. So there was no play. Everything was serious. And you had to be VERY respectful of your teachers or you would get in big trouble with your parents.

WIDMEYER: In school, was the curriculum much different for the girls than it was for the boys?

LOIS: No, we did just about everything they had, like basketball. We didn't play football but we played basketball. We sang in the chorus, we played in the band. I was a majorette. Everything - we got into everything at school. Anything that we could get into. And it was all fun.

WIDMEYER: Did you have cooking and all that?

LOIS: We had Home Economics and learned how to sew. We learned how to be homemakers.

WIDMEYER: When kids dated in high school, what would you do?

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LOIS: We'd go to the movies and church. And out dancing, when our parents would let us. Our parents were REALLY religious. So they didn't believe too much in dancing but we would dance.

GOODSILL: Where would you go dancing?

LOIS: Some place called the Double Bar Ranch.

WIDMEYER: And that was where?

LOIS: It was in Stafford. But mostly we went to church.

WIDMEYER: When did you graduate from high school?

LOIS: 1959, the same as Clarence.

WIDMEYER: When did you get married?

LOIS: In 1960.

WIDMEYER: What's it been like, raising children versus your parents' raising you?

LOIS: We followed some of their examples. It was great. The difference is I was from an all black area, which was nice. When our children came along, it was integrated. That was a difference. We got to know the difference in the races. It turned out to be fine because we always somehow got along with all the races. So we have lots of friends. All of our children went to school with the integrated kids. Our first child went to school at Lakeview Elementary.

WIDMEYER: What year would that have been? 1965 or 1966 probably?

LOIS: Yes, 1965.

CLARENCE: He was born in 1961 so he went to Lakeview and by 1965 it was integrated.

GOODSILL: So there was a difference in the way you raised your kids because of integration?

LOIS: When you're behind closed doors, you're going to stick to what your parents taught you. We would talk to our children and if they needed spanking, we would spank them. We just didn't spank them as hard as our parents did. We talked to them and we would tell them why. The same way we were raised, that's the way we raised them.

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It was always to be very respectful, 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am'. That was just the way it was. So they kind of lived in two different worlds. When they came home, they said 'yes ma'am' and 'no, ma'am' to us, but 'yes' and 'no' at school. It was okay.

WIDMEYER: I wanted to ask you, and I forgot to ask your husband. Was there a facility to swim in when you were in high school?

CLARENCE: Yeah, the in the back. The creek. That's where I learned to swim.

WIDMEYER: But not a municipal pool.

McLEMORE, both: No.

LOIS: Well, we had a community pool back there. I would take them to the swimming pool and they learned how to swim.

GOODSILL: Did I hear you say that you worked at M. R. Wood for a while?

LOIS: I DID work at M. R. Wood. When the kids started school, I started working part-time at M. R. Wood. I volunteer there now, two days a week.

GOODSILL: They've changed the format of that school.

LOIS: It's an Alternative School now. But it's a very nice Alternative School. The teachers and the facility are all really very nice. The children LOVE the teachers because they can get this one-on-one time that they need. And it's been real good. Most of the children come from the surrounding areas and they've done something they shouldn't have. But when they come over to the school and the teachers give them the attention that they need, they become better students. And they hate to go back to their regular school. So it's really a good school. Real good. And they have restored the school so it is BEAUTIFUL. And the surroundings are beautiful. They upgraded from when we were there. So it's good to be there.

They had a meeting last night and some of the students were there. They were just SO happy. They had an open house. So it's a good area. It's good. I have nothing negative to say. It's all good.

WIDMEYER: The children come from throughout Fort Bend ISD?

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LOIS: Yes, they are all Fort Bend children. I think twenty children came in yesterday. As soon as school gets started, kids get into trouble. And they just send them to M.R. Wood to be corrected. Then they send them back to their school. When they come over here, they have uniforms. The boys have on a purple shirt and khakis. The girls have green shirts and khakis. It's a uniform school. They come in with total respect. Absolutely total respect. When they leave they are better students. A lot of them cry when they have to leave because they've gotten this one-on-one attention, which they need. Sometimes schools are too big for them to get that attention. A lot of students are very talented but it's never known because there are too many students. So they act up and then they are sent off to Alternative School. Then they get the attention they need. They just blossom. You'd be amazed at the things that they do. It's a wonderful school. It really is.

GOODSILL: Do you have any favorite stories that you remember from growing up? The kinds of stories that when you tell your kids, they roll their eyes?

LOIS: I can't think of any right now.

WIDMEYER: You were such a GOOD girl.

LOIS: (laughing) Actually, I don't want to seem pious but I was, because my daddy was SUCH a disciplinarian. You didn't do ANYTHING to disrespect my daddy. He worked here, in Sugar Land. He did the mowing for Imperial and he was just a house away from the school. He could come over to the school and see what we were doing. The teachers would tell on you. They didn't play! We didn't break any laws. (laughs) My husband did, but I didn't! He was braver than me.

GOODSILL: Did your family want to move to Sugar Land?

LOIS: No, we never wanted to move. We always wanted to live in the country. They wanted to keep us in the country. There were so many of us. We had more room. It took a lot for us to eat because I came from a family of ten but we all had other relatives living with us. So we needed a house where you could have a garden. We were healthy eaters. We never thought about moving to the city. It's just like someone asking if we ever thought about going to school with the white children. It never bothered us, whether we went to school with white kids or not. We were real self-satisfied because the teachers kept us very busy in our world.

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We had basketball, we had everything that they had, so we never thought about until it happened. So when it happened, it just went over. We never had an attitude about 'why didn't we go to the school with the other kids'. We were satisfied. And our desire was to go to college, but once we DID get out of high school, you didn't have the money to go. So you did the next thing. We got married. But we really wanted to go to college. You couldn't borrow the money because they weren't letting blacks borrow money at the time. So we just got married. That was the next decent thing to do.

GOODSILL: Did you work after that or did you raise your family?

LOIS: I stayed home for a while. My husband wanted me to stay home so I was a homemaker for about ten or twelve years. After the kids grew up, he asked me if I would like work and I told him I would. So I started part-time at M. R. Wood and then ended up at Comerica Bank. I worked for about 22 years. Then I retired. I'm retired! So life has been good. We're very thankful for our lives. We're not bitter or anything. We're just thankful for the life that we've had, because it's been good. When everything integrated we did go to church with different races, but mainly whites. We have many, many white friends. We never had a problem with having white friends. We've even had them to live here with us! We've been blessed.

GOODSILL: I've thought about integration of schools, integration of shops and so on, but I've never thought about integration of churches. Will you tell us some more about that?

LOIS: We were Baptist at first, and then we would listen to the radio. We wanted to upgrade our beliefs because we felt like we didn't know enough. So went into this church called the Worldwide Church of God. It was a church of all races. But the minister was white. We stayed in this church for about 30 years.

WIDMEYER: Where was that?

CLARENCE: It was international. It was based out of Pasadena, California, with Garner Ted Armstrong.

WIDMEYER: So where was that facility?

LOIS: In Houston. It was very diverse. We did a lot of things, did a lot of traveling. We exposed our kids to a lot of things. We've had a good life - we HAVE a good life. We're not rich (laughs) but we are rich in deeds and good.

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WIDMEYER: When you say you exposed your kids to a lot of things as they were growing up, did you mean travel?

LOIS: Yes, we traveled a lot.

WIDMEYER: Have you been to the Lakewood Church since it opened? It sounds a little like that.

CLARENCE: No. It's not anything like the church we were in. It wasn't a cult but was strictly a Bible discipline. Sabbath Day, Holy Days, Jewish concepts, etc. It was strictly Bible oriented.

GOODSILL: It captures my attention that you grew up in a completely black community and that was normal for you and that felt right and where you belonged. Then the world must have changed a lot for you. You (Lois) are saying no, and he (Clarence) is saying yes!

CLARENCE: No, I'm saying yes, it DID change.

LOIS: We didn't change. We just accepted the change. Some things you just have to accept. You can't change it so you move along with it.

CLARENCE: And women see it from another point of view. Females look at social concepts differently. Men look at it with a challenge, and say, 'I didn't get a good job because I'm black'.

LOIS: Actually I look at it from that struggle. I knew that as a black man, he had a struggle. I was his wife so I wasn't going to say we weren't going to make it or we're going to feel sorry for ourselves. I would always tell him that we're going to make it. Somehow we're going to make it. But it was a struggle. It was hard! But we didn't get angry. That's all I'm saying. But it was hard. We had hard times. We had times where we didn't know what we were going to do. And we did have four children to raise. But somehow we made it. We just said we would survive. And everything that happened wasn't sweet and nicy-nice. We had our knock-arounds. But you don't dwell on that. You try to dwell on what's positive. That's what we always tried to do. That's what our family taught us.

And to tell a story, when I was a girl in the country, we DID live next door to a white family. And we would ALL play together. But we all knew our places in playing together. We would go to each other's home. I'll never forget that every Wednesday night our parents would invite this family over to our home to watch the Grand Old Opry.

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But we would all stay in our places. Our parents never taught us that we were lesser than anyone. It was just something you KNEW. You didn't question it. Being children, it was just so far you were going to go. You weren't going to say anything to your parents about anything that happened. So you were afraid, a little bit. But what I was going to say, but my husband kind of cleared his throat, so I thought maybe I shouldn't say it. But I WILL say it. Living next door to this white family, everybody was nice and we all played together. We had never heard the "n" word. I'll never forget that I walked into the front door of their house, and he said, 'NO you little "n" girl. You come OUT of the front door and you go around to the back. Do not come through the front door.'

WIDMEYER: Who said that?

McCLEMORE, L: The neighbor. It affected me all my life that I didn't know how to tell my parents. Later on, I understood what it was. But we never used the word. Never. That really DID affect me until later in life, but I never held it against anyone. I just knew that there was a difference and that was the word for it. Now you can't use it. (chuckles) But that's the only discrimination I've ever had.

WIDMEYER: This area was so different from what we think of as the Deep South, such as Mississippi. And the North was pretty rugged on minorities in the 1960s. I recall it was a very tumultuous period. But it doesn't sound like it affected this immediate area.

LOIS & CLARENCE: No. It didn't.

WIDMEYER: There was always the threat of violence in the city I lived in. I mean, riots and crazy things, especially after the assassinations.

LOIS: There is one more thing I've thought of. When we started school here, the Hispanics and the blacks lived in the same community. But the Hispanic children went to school at Lakeview. They would walk out of the community over to Lakeview. And we all stayed side-by-side. Like my husband said, we did not mix even though we lived right next door to each other. They were actually taught that they were better. And it took years for them to realize we were all the same. We all lived in the same neighborhood.

CLARENCE: The Mexicans were considered--and I'm saying Mexicans because that's what we called them - they were not Hispanics then. They were considered white. That school was down here, about a half block away, and then they moved them over there, in 1955 or 1956 I think. It was not Lakeview then. It was Sugar Land High School. The Gators. Kenneth Hall. The Sugar Land Express.

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LOIS: But all that has changed now. Everybody has come together. We are all real close in the neighborhood now. Everybody's marrying one another. (laughing)

WIDMEYER: What do you think the racial breakdown is, right now, in Mayfield Park? Any idea?

CLARENCE: It's probably 50 – 50, I'd say. And then the mulattos and 'caroons and the rest. (everybody snickering at Clarence)

GOODSILL: Any other questions?

WIDMEYER: No, we've taken enough of your time. This has been some excellent history.

GOODSILL: Well said.

LOIS: Thank you. It's been fun. We're glad to be of help.

WIDMEYER: Thanks. We'll transcribe this. I want to write an article about it but I'll run it by you before it ever sees daylight.

CLARENCE: That would be good. This is a really, really nice city.

WIDMEYER: There are things about Sugar Land – this is just an example – When we commissioned that painting at the Palms Theater, I wrote the thumbnail bits under each picture. I said that the theater was segregated and Mexicans and coloreds were instructed to sit elsewhere. Well, of course, they took it out of the text. I think we're at the point now where you want to tell the whole story.

CLARENCE: I'm of the frame of mind of Obama. If you bring up the historical facts, it bothers people and it's not necessary. I'm saying if you were to have that article in here on this page I don't think it's necessary for a white person to know that. Unless he actually wants to know the historical fact about what the conditions were. People have this tendency to feel guilty and blame for things that they weren't responsible for. Like the President says, 'If you need to know what was done for your own personal gratification or knowledge, just go look it up.' I don't think white people should have to see what was done 25, 30 or 100 years ago. I just don't think they need to deal with it.

LOIS: Unless they want to.

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CLARENCE: Unless they want to. Because conditions have changed. And people have changed. If people change then you are not really responsible for the past generation's actions.

McLEMORE, LOIS; Mainly, all you want is to be treated fairly. Once you're being treated fairly, you hold no grudges. You just want the same thing.

WIDMEYER: I just wanted to mention that the theater was segregated at one time.

CLARENCE: That would be a given. That would actually be a given.

GOODSILL: But there are so many people who don't know that. People of this generation.

CLARENCE: Why do you need to know? For your own personal reasons?

WIDMEYER: I don't think people my age can understand why things are the way they are now unless we understand what happened in the past.

CLARENCE: Then you would have to be in a condition that would promote that type of thought, right? Wouldn't you have to be in a situation that some black kid would call you a honkey and then you would say, 'Well, why does he have that attitude toward me?' Suppose the conditions don't warrant that and if it doesn't warrant that, why wouldn't there be somewhere that if you needed to know the historical fact, that you could go find out why, rather than it being used as some type of whooping stick.

GOODSILL: I understand your point. But if people don't know what President Obama is referring to in the past, then they can't see how the country is STILL divided. How there are some parts of the population that are not getting the respect that they deserve. Socio-economic development has to happen unilaterally. That's the culture in our country now, but it's not where we came from. And I think we need to know where we came from.

CLARENCE: Yes, that's true. But he moves away from that, really fast. He moves away.

GOODSILL: Yes, he does, which I like.

CLARENCE: What he does is, he says, 'Understand where we are'. Everybody knows about the Indians. Everybody knows what happened. Everybody knows the injustices.

WIDMEYER: I don't think that's true.

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GOODSILL: I don't either.

CLARENCE: The intelligent people know!

GOODSILL: Not everybody knows what YOUR experience was, growing up.

WIDMEYER: I've had the privilege of never having to think about my race. If someone is called a honky, I don't think that's going to spur them to go do research. If they don't know anything about history they are just going to label that person a certain way and that's going to be it.

CLARENCE: It's like moving up into a position when you're child grows up. There comes a time when the child becomes an adult and the conversation, the dialog, has to change. What Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton do, they didn't bring up racism any more because we had gotten beyond it. Now white people were beginning to understand that we're not looking at the man's color, we're looking at what he's doing, and what he's saying. Since it's a perfect storm and everything is going exactly right, they relinquished their rhetoric to a point that segregation would not be thrown in his face and irritate people. There's a time when you have to say 'Let's understand the history BUT let's don't use it to irritate to a point of whooping.' And my point is you can't go forward unless you can get beyond this thing. And black people are doing it quite well. Like I said before, apartheid ended on January 20th. This nation became a great nation. It happened when France sent the Statue of Liberty over, because we had come out of slavery and were a great nation. We had become civilized. That was a fantastic thing, just like this election. America became a wonderful nation when we got rid of apartheid, or Jim Crow.

LOIS: We have a long way to go but we are ahead in some ways.

CLARENCE: But Obama knows exactly where we came from. The young generation may not know but there has to be a positive spin on it to a point that it's not going to make you feel bad. There are people who say, 'I didn't do anything. I'm not responsible for that. I didn't keep anybody in slavery. And people shouldn't tell me that I'm responsible for the condition.' And they are not.

WIDMEYER: Guilt is good.

CLARENCE: Guilt is good if it's going to make changes. (lots of laughter) Rather than getting violent. Guilt is good as long as you repent.

WIDMEYER: Absolutely.

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CLARENCE: You need to know what you've done but it needs to be in the right perspective. You can't be responsible for 1965 and the riots and the police and Mississippi.

WIDMEYER: But to not be aware of it, to me, would be a real mistake.

CLARENCE: But that's what history is about. And an intelligent person is going to look for reasons to understand what's going on.

WIDMEYER: Or history will repeat itself. (getting photo albums)

CLARENCE: It would have been wonderful if we had kept some of those (coupon books).

Interview ends

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