

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewees: **Lou Payton**

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Interviewer: Bryan McAuley

Transcriber: Olga Barr

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*Transcript*

McAULEY: Good Morning, Lou. Let's just start with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born? Do you remember anything about a hospital or doctor or midwife that might have been involved that your family talked about?

PAYTON: I was born in Bloomington, Illinois, February 1928. I did not move to Richmond until November of 1944. So I don't know how much help I can be with things that happened back in those days. I remember very clearly the things that happened after I moved here.

McAULEY: That's the focus for us today—so that's great. Tell me whatever early memories you have about life once your family got to Richmond.

PAYTON: My mother and my uncle operated a café. It was right by the 90 bridge called the Oasis Café when we first moved here. I guess I must have been sixteen at the time. I was going to school in Sugar Land—finished high school there in 1946. Of the things that I remember from that time, the most unfortunate was an incident that happened at our café. It was on a Monday night, which was a school night. I had had football practice that day and I was tired. We had living quarters, an apartment over the restaurant. About eleven o'clock I heard glass breaking downstairs. I put on my clothes and went down to see what was going on. My uncle was gone on a trip and my mother was there by herself with a cook and a waitress. When I walked in the backdoor I saw a soldier in uniform and he was throwing things. We had a counter with stools. Behind that counter was glass a mirrored wall with glass shelf. He was throwing everything he could find on the counter at the glasses and the mirror. I started for him to stop him because nobody else—there were a lot of military people in there, soldiers and sailors. I started to try to stop him and my mother said, "No, he's won some kind of medal. I've called the police. There on the way we'll let them handle it." He said something to her and we're on the opposite side of the counter from him, he was infuriated. He lunged across the counter and tried to hit her with his fists. In fact, he just barely grazed her with his fists. When he did that I grabbed him by the jacket and pulled him down on the counter. I was groping around holding him with one hand and trying to get a Coke bottle to wear him out with. At that time a sailor in uniform grabbed a baseball bat that we kept by the cash register and hit him across the back with it three times. We threw him out the front door.

It turns out that he had been drunk. He had been down on Mud Alley celebrating. He's name was Macario Garcia. He had won the Congressional Medal of Honor. We didn't know any of that at the time. He had come in—the bus station was right next to the Oasis Café. He had come in and my mother wouldn't serve him because he was drunk, which set him off and caused all the problems. When we went out on the front parking lot—there were several of the girls from over in the alley that had brought him over there to the bus station. They proceeded to curse us. They said they were going to come back and burn the place down later on. I had a sixteen-gauge shotgun. I set up on the porch upstairs all night until daylight waiting to see if they did come, but nothing ever happened. The police took him to the police station and released him. Later on the next week Walter Winchell had it on his program and really tried to make Richmond look like it was a racial incident and it was not. It was just the fact that he was too drunk to be served. We didn't serve people who'd been in the condition he was in. So that's what I remember in my early days.

I was playing basketball and football in Sugar Land so I did not want to move to Richmond. I lived with a family in Sugar Land and came back and forth to the house to get clothes and whatever else I needed. Most of the time I would hitchhike back to Sugar Land. One of the people who picked me up was a young man named Bill Bishop who worked in the shipyard. He rode a motorcycle. He picked me up and took me to Sugar Land. I'd go to school. That's about all I remember from that particular period.

McAULEY: What compelled your family to move from Illinois to this part of Texas?

PAYTON: I moved to Texas two Sundays after Pearl Harbor. My mother had moved here and my uncle also to work. That was the motivation for us moving to Texas. I was in a boy's school in Illinois and I had come down just for the Christmas holidays. My mother bought me my first bicycle. After Christmas vacation was over, she asked me if I wanted to go back to school in Illinois and I thought, well when I left Illinois it was twenty degrees below zero and snowing. I got down here and it was eighty degrees and people were playing baseball. I said, "No, I think I like Houston pretty good." We lived in Houston until we moved to Sugar Land and then on to Richmond.

McAULEY: At the beginning of World War II was there a specific field of work that lured them or did they come here because they knew someone and then opened the restaurant?

PAYTON: They both worked for a private detective agency that travelled around the country and shopped different businesses to see if their employees were stealing. That work had brought them to Houston. I think they normally stayed in the community a short time—maybe a couple of weeks and then moved on to someplace else, which was the reason I was in that boys' school. There was no way for me to live with them and go to school. My uncle had a relationship with a gentleman who had an optical store in Houston. He and my mother both quit that company and stayed in Houston. They just like Houston. They didn't like traveling all the time.

McAULEY: As you described, you were living primarily in Sugar Land while you finished school. Do you remember anything else about other businesses or families that were nearby that your family interacted with while they were running the restaurant?

PAYTON: Well, a lot of the local people came in the restaurant. At that time there were only two restaurants in Richmond. Ours was a combination restaurant and nightclub. We stayed open until probably one or two o'clock in the morning. It had a dance floor and jukebox. That's about the only entertainment they had at night in the Richmond area. I got to know a lot of the local people—especially a lot of the local kids--played softball—some of the families—the Briscoes, the McCullochs. Those were some of the people. I married a girl named Martha Ansel whose father was the mayor of Richmond. He had a Western Auto and a John Deere dealership, which was at the corner of Third and Jackson where the courthouse complex is now. The other people that I got involved with were Hilmar Moore and the Wessendorffs. Richmond was a small tightly knit community. I was fortunate enough to make friends. Sometimes with small communities you're either a part of this family or you're not. I was fortunate that they took me in and made me part of the family.

McAULEY: So what can you tell me about your courting of Ms. Ansel, the mayor's daughter.

PAYTON: Well, she came to the café many times. I thought she was one of the cutest girls in town. I had a friend who I played football with who was dating one of her best friends. They kind of set up a blind date for us. From then on we went steady until we went off to college. We finally married in 1950.

McAULEY: You've described Richmond as a small town. Was it in any way intimidating? What were your thoughts about dating the daughter of the mayor?

PAYTON: They were very friendly toward me. He and his wife were just super people. They took me in as part of their family. They had three other children. Martha was the oldest. I think the fact that I was involved with sports so much was one of the reasons that I was accepted because a lot of the younger men were also sports minded.

McAULEY: Do you remember anything about places that the family shopped?

PAYTON: There were several grocery stores in the downtown area that we purchased food. We also served beer and that came from Houston. The mercantile stores, of course, that's where we bought our clothes and shoes and other things that we needed. There were several gas stations in the vicinity—in the downtown area. We tried to trade with everybody.

McAULEY: Did you do anything for entertainment or was the job the main focus of your lives then at the restaurant?

PAYTON: Running the business was the main focus of course. We didn't have a bowling alley; we didn't have a golf course at that time. The only other endeavors that the young man participated in were the swimming pool and softball.

McAULEY: Do you remember anything about your family participating in a church community?

PAYTON: My wife's family belonged to the Episcopal Church. I had been raised in the Christian church. There was no Christian church in Richmond. I affiliated with her church. My mother and my uncle were not churchgoers. They had also been raised in the Christian church. There was no Christian church here. I don't recall them being involved with anyone else.

McAULEY: You would attend school in Sugar Land and then come for a day or two at a time or come for the weekend to work at the restaurant?

PAYTON: Yes.

McAULEY: Can you describe one of those days when you were going to be here in Richmond?

PAYTON: We'd get up in the morning, of course. We open the restaurant about 8:00 A.M. and serve coffee and breakfast to anyone who happened to come by. Just taking care of the general chores that went along with running that business kept me pretty busy. I was kind of the go-fer, you know being a teenager. They kept me busy. It was during the war that things were hard to come by. I drove to Gonzales—they had chicken farms in Gonzales. I would get, I don't remember how many chickens, maybe a box chickens—25, 30, 40 chickens to take back to serve. That's one of the things I remember.

McAULEY: So how were you transporting that many chickens? Did you have them in the back of a pickup truck?

PAYTON: No, my uncle an Oldsmobile convertible. Somehow I got it in the trunk or the backseat.

McAULEY: And made that drive from 90 to come back to the restaurant?

PAYTON: I did.

McAULEY: Was there something you remember being prominent or talked about a lot during that time related to the schools of the young men?

PAYTON: I can't remember anything. Several of them were involved with Masonic Lodge. Most of them were older than I was. They got me interested in that. I can't recall any specifics other than just the daily activities everybody had.

McAULEY: Well, going to a different school, did the young people in Richmond come to the restaurant so you met people your age?

PAYTON: Yes, yes I did.

McAULEY: Is there anything that you remember specific to your work in the restaurant? You mentioned the very vivid memory about Mr. Garcia's experience. Is there anything else that really resonates with you in terms of working in the restaurant?

PAYTON: Kind of a funny experience. Two men came in who worked in the oilfield and met there one night and were going to Houston to gamble. They got back about midnight. One of them had money in every pocket. He'd won over \$80,000 gambling and shooting dice. He had snapped his fingers every time he rolled the dice. He did it so many times that he split his thumb open. My mother bandaged it for him, and I remember he gave her a hundred dollar bill for doing that.

He had a 1940 Chevy that was in the parking lot. Not only had he won over \$80,000, which we helped him count that night, but he won a Cadillac car, which he drove back and the other fellow drove his car back. He said, "Well what are you going to do with this other car?" He gave me the keys and he said, "First poor person that comes by give him that car." I don't recall now what happened.

McAULEY: Oh my goodness.

PAYTON: But that was kind of humorous incident. We were right on the main highway from Houston to San Antonio, so we got a lot of visitors at Martha's daddy's store. There were so many famous people who came in there to get gas or to buy hunting and fishing equipment and things like that. R. E. Bob Smith was one of them. The mayor of Houston — what was his name—he helped build the Astrodome.

McAULEY: Mr. Hofheinz

PAYTON: Hofheinz, Roy Hofheinz and his son came in. His son was ten or twelve at the time, as I recall. A man named Jack Mosler, who was quite well known in the financial circles, had a ranch near Richmond. We sold a refrigerator to Ray Charles' wife, the singer. Her mother lived out on 359, and we sold her a refrigerator for her mother. One of the interesting things that happened was one rainy day I looked across the street and there was a white Cadillac pulling a two-wheel trailer. It had pulled in to the Gulf station across the street. I was just standing there watching what was going on. They were talking to the man who owned the station. He pointed across the street toward us.

They drove over there where I was and parked, came in and asked me if we had two tires that would fit the Cadillac they were driving. I said, "Yes, I did." He said, "Go ahead and put them on for me." They were pretty scruffy looking. They had long hair. This was back in the early sixties. I had decided that I wasn't going to take a check from them. I said, "Okay, well, who do you want me to make out the bill to?" He said, "You can make it out to me. I'm Jerry Lee Lewis." We had a little music section in the store. We had guitars and little electronic organs and things like that. He asked me, "While they're putting on those tires you mind if we play with some of that stuff over here?" "No, I'd be glad for you to." And I called everybody I could think of to tell them to come down and see Jerry Lee Lewis.

McAULEY: Had a free concert with Jerry Lee Lewis!! When you married in 1950, did you and your wife come back and work with her father's store or is this another store that you operated? What are we discussing?

PAYTON: No, this was his store. This was Mr. Ansel's store. I worked for him in the summers. Well, in the summer I was a lifeguard at the pool. I managed the Richmond City pool in '51, '52 and played semi-pro baseball. We had a semi-pro baseball team here called Fort Bend Jaybirds. I had gone to the University of Houston and played baseball at the University of Houston. We had a few local boys who played on the Jaybirds. Most of them were from Houston or around other parts of Texas. One of the players we had was a man named Wally Moon who later on played with the Dodgers. We had several ex-pros playing who we played with and against. I lost my train of thought about the store. I guess that's all I can remember mostly about working at the store for Mr. Ansel. He also had a ranch and was a rice farmer. I worked on the ranch for him just cowboying—just doing the kinds of things that young people do to try to make it.

McAULEY: So when you and your wife married in 1950 you came back and lived in Richmond?

PAYTON: Yes. We had an apartment on Winston Drive and later bought a house on Winston Drive. We lived in Richmond most of the time. We moved to Bay City in 1965 and lived there for about ten years and moved back to Richmond.

McAULEY: I'm curious there's been an interest in the recent years about some of the sporting history that you've alluded to today with your background. What can you tell me about working with the semi-pro team. Did you do a lot of barnstorming and travel with the team? What were those experiences like?

PAYTON: We played I guess maybe forty or fifty games during the summer. We played Victoria, Weimer, Columbus, El Campo, and lot of teams out of Houston—Houston area. The first year we had the team in 1950 we played the Houston Post Tournament and finished fifth. The next year we finished third and in 1952 we won the tournament. Back in those days it was pretty much before air conditioning and before television had really taken a hold. One of the highlights of the summer was the ball club. We got good crowds for a big rivalry game with Weimer-- Victoria people like that. We'd get two or three thousand people, which was pretty good.

McAULEY: Where did you play here in the Richmond area when you were hosting games?

PAYTON: Our field was right behind where Fiesta is now. It was the old Fort Bend County Fairgrounds was at that location. There was an area big enough to accommodate a baseball park right behind the park—right behind the fairgrounds.

McAULEY: So you've discussed the semi-pro club the Jaybirds. When you would travel places like Victoria, did y'all have several vehicles they you traveled in?

PAYTON: Yes, yes. Everybody took their own car. We'd load everybody's car up and away we'd go.

McAULEY: Did you coordinate trips so that you played several games—be gone for several days or a week and make a round or were these day trips?

PAYTON: Yeah they were mostly, we'd play at night and on Sunday afternoons. I don't recall that we ever spent the night away from home. The furthest trip we made was to Sinton and Huntsville and several trips to Houston of course, but nowhere far enough that we'd have to spend the night, no.

McAULEY: Can you recall the names of any of the other local young men that played with you with the Jaybirds?

PAYTON: J. R. Hardin played with us, Virgil Shadox, Gus Hrner and his brother Tack Hrner. Those were the ones who were good enough to play on that team. The rest of them were college boys and ex-professional players who were out of college, still in college or out of college. Some of them still played professional baseball and went into pro-ball. We had several that we played against who had been in the majors or were on their way to the majors. It was pretty good baseball.

McAULEY: Did you family maintain any kind of garden? PAYTON: No, no, we didn't.

McAULEY: You mentioned doing some ranch work and hand work for Mr. Ansel's ranch. Do you remember anything specific about those days in terms of managing livestock?

PAYTON: It's hard to describe. It just the daily chores—building fence, getting the bulls up for the winter pasture, vaccinating the cattle. Back in those days the screwworms were real bad. It's before they were able to eradicate the screwworms. We spent a lot of time in the spring and summer out in the pasture roping calves and doctoring. When they were born, of course, they had the umbilical cord that was raw. That's what the flies would attack, and they would get screwworms. If they had a wound, cut on a barbwire fence or something--that's where we need usually rope them and hold them down long enough to put what was called Smear 62 on them, which would cure them and keep them from getting more infected.

McAULEY: Do you still live in Richmond today?

PAYTON: I do.

McAULEY: What have you seen that really strikes you in terms of changes to this area since 1940?

PAYTON: Well back in those days it was fairly close-knit community. I think when I moved here there were maybe twenty-five hundred people lived in Richmond. Once the highway system improved enough to where people could go to Houston to work, Richmond turned into a bedroom community. We don't have our little country town anymore where everybody knew everybody else. We even knew the dog's names mostly. That's something that I think is regrettable in some ways. But that's progress. Time marches on.

McAULEY: Is there anything that you would reflect on as being a particularly positive change in Richmond in your lifetime—something you've been impressed by?

PAYTON: Well I think it's been a very progressive little city—been very conservative.

McAULEY: Can you reflect on changes that have happened in the layout of the town—where the center of the town was or where businesses were then compared to now?

PAYTON: The town has spread out naturally. The old sections of town are pretty much the same as they were when I moved here. The central part of the city has changed very little with the exception that the county has built a lot of big buildings to service the county business. The smaller residential developments that have sprung up around Richmond. I have no idea what the population is now but it's getting pretty big.

McAULEY: Can you chronologically lay out the work that you've done in your life here in Richmond?

PAYTON: My family moved on from Richmond after I had finished high school. I went to college at Southwest Texas and was there for a year and a half and finished at the University of Houston. During the times that I was in college, I worked for the Richmond Rice Association at their dryer in Crabb. I worked for Mr. Ansel doing several things either working at the store or working at the ranch. When I finished college I stayed in the store working for him until 1955 when I went to work for some local men who had a business in Houston called McCormick Steel Company. It was a big steel warehouse. I went to work for them as a salesman—outside salesman. I did a lot of traveling. I stayed with them until 1959 at which time I went back to work for Mr. Ansel to run the store until we moved in 1965 to Bay City for another business opportunity that I had. I worked for company in Houston called T. L. Walker Bearing Company. They wanted to expand their business and open an office in Bay City, which I did. I worked for them for until 1982 when I started my own business. My son and my daughter started a company called Triangle Distributing Company. We sold it, I think, in '92. At that time I kind of retired.

McAULEY: Are there any vivid memories you have from working at Mr. Ansel's store? Types of products you sold or things the store was known for.

PAYTON: It is a kind of day to day humdrum business. We sold hardware. We sold fishing tackle and hunting equipment. We sold paint. We had furniture. It was a general store. He also had the John Deere dealership. He had a garage where the mechanics worked on tractors and farm equipment. It was probably, I'm guessing, probably one of the biggest businesses in Richmond.

McAULEY: Was that entire operation at Third and Jackson. Was it all centralized?

PAYTON: Yes, it was.

McAULEY: You mentioned the Masons earlier—some of the young men who participated in the Masonic Lodge. Are there other organizations that you recall?

PAYTON: All of the merchants were pretty much involved in civic projects. I remember that I was with the Community Chest and different civic organizations—the Salvation Army. I was in the Rotary Club. Organizations like that depended on the merchants to do the things that needed to be done for people that needed help.

McAULEY: I'm really curious the story that we started with today. You have vivid memories about being in the restaurant when this incident with Mr. Garcia took place. Was there any fallout at the restaurant as a result?

PAYTON: There were not any repercussions from it. As I said, it went national. The people who had that kind of an agenda in mind tried to make it something more than it was, but our business did not suffer from it. My mother at first declined to press charges against him because of his war record. But a week or so after the incident because of all the national news that was derogatory to Richmond, the county officials asked her if she would not reconsider and file charges so that people would know what the truth was about the story. So she did. Political pressure was brought to bear as I remember, and the case was never brought to trial. They just swept everything under the rug.

McAULEY: After you finished high school did your family sell The Oasis to someone else?

PAYTON: They had an opportunity to move to Rosenberg. An older man had two businesses in Rosenberg. One was called The Tavern and one was called The Travelers. They were two separate locations. The Travelers was a restaurant, and The Tavern was a nightspot. We had attracted such a big following at The Oasis that this older gentlemen, who owned those two businesses, asked my mother and my uncle to take his business over because he had gotten to an age where he was not able to do it. So they moved on there.

McAULEY: So did they sell The Oasis? Do you recall if it remained a restaurant?

PAYTON: No. It was later the Singer Sewing Machine retail outlet. It was never a restaurant after that. We leased from a dentist on the property. His name was Doctor Newton. We leased the property from him and we just relinquished the lease and moved on to Rosenberg.

McAULEY: Is there anything else today, Mr. Payton, that you would like to share?

PAYTON: I've had a wonderful life in Richmond and wonderful friends. I raised a daughter and a son here. I think it's been a great place to live. I'm just thankful I've been able to make so many good friends.

McAULEY: You moved here at a very pivotal time in our country's history—right at the beginning of the World War. Do you have any specific memories about Richmond during the war?

PAYTON: Just that things were difficult to come by. Tires were rationed, gasoline was

rationed. They had what was called ABC card depending on what your requirements were. Average person would have an A card. I think that gave you maybe five gallons a week of gas. Then there was a B and a C. The C was for farmers and people who were dependent on travel for their livelihood qualified for that. Sugar was rationed. It was hard to get all the things that we take for granted now were fairly difficult to come by back in those days.

McAULEY: Do you have any memories of local families who lost their sons or fathers fighting?

PAYTON: Of course there were several families that lost some of their sons. That was a sad time for the community because as I said it was such a small community and so close-knit that everybody knew everybody else. Whenever we heard someone had been lost in the service it was a sad time for the whole community.

McAULEY: Was The Oasis a location for the celebrations that might have broken out at the news that the war was over? Do you have any remembrance of that?

PAYTON: Yeah, we did have a big celebration, not anything that was planned by the city or anything. It was just a spontaneous demonstration of people coming out, so thankful that the war was over. We sold a lot of beer.

McAULEY: I think that concludes our interview today. I really appreciate your time coming out and helping us with this project.