

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Margaret Dierks Phillips**

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Comment: Sugar Land School and How the
Buildings Were Used

12 Pages



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Transcript

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Ms. Phillips is a bit older than Ms. Smith, but both went to the same school.]

SMITH: Today we are talking about the Sugar Land School. Tell us how the classrooms were laid out?

PHILLIPS: I'm remembering things in 1943. The "circles" were actually semi-circles. The auditorium was in the middle and there were five individual rooms on the left and five on the right, with a covered walkway. Pillars held up the roof of the covered walkway. The first room was 1st grade, second room was 2nd grade and so on, with the 5th grade being the last building on the left-hand side. I think behind the 5th grade there was another small building that they stored books in, during the summertime. I think one summer, later on, termites got in there and ate the books.

On the right-hand side as you are facing the auditorium, the first room was the 6th grade. I'm not sure if the next room was the cafeteria or the band hall, and this may not be correct, but this is how I remember it.

I'm not sure what the 4th room was. I know the last room was the 7th grade. That was what we called Junior High. When you were in the last room of that semi-circle, you didn't get to go to recess. You had Physical Education (PE). 6th grade was Junior High when I was in school, which I dreaded. (laughter) I didn't think I could possibly live without recess. We had seesaws, and swings; we played hopscotch, jacks, jump rope, and marbles. We had some really nice oak trees out in the playground, which was in the middle of the semi-circle.

There was a driveway that during the school hours had a chain across it. The driveway went in front of each of the school buildings and the auditorium and they loaded the buses from the auditorium. When school wasn't in session, I don't know if they put a chain up. On each end of the driveway there were lampposts, made by Westinghouse, and they had a plate on them reading "1927". I own one of them. In my husband's memory, it was donated to Sugar Land Cultural Arts Foundation for the restoration of the auditorium.

SMITH: In 1919, there was just the one circle. I know it was before your time, but do you remember hearing when the second circle was built?

PHILLIPS: I have a family picture and it's there. My understanding is the 2nd circle was built in the 1920s.



You know more than I do. There was a gravel road that ran, starting right behind the 7th grade building, straight back to Lakeview Drive. During the day you couldn't drive that way at all. It was closed until school was let out and everybody was gone.

SMITH: Where would you go on that road?

PHILLIPS: You'd cut through to Lakeview. There was also a street in front of the circle, not the driveway, but a street that was an extension of First Street. When they dredged Cleveland Lake and connected it to Oyster Creek, they built First Street. Until then, Second Street was called Front Street. There were steps going up to The Hill from Highway 90. It wasn't a big hill but it was a hill.

The gravel street ran back behind the 7th grade building and there were tennis courts behind the elementary school circle. The "new" cafeteria (laughing) has been built since then, on the south side of the tennis courts. The town used the tennis courts during the evening. Anybody could play on them.

Then you crossed the little gravel street, set back a little more north, was the circle that the gymnasium was in. I think there were four classrooms on the left of the gym. The one closest to the gymnasium was the science/chemistry lab and the room right next to it was the library/study hall (or vice versa). Past the gymnasium there were two more classrooms and I think one of those was the typing/bookkeeping department. At one time there were only eleven grades. Three of my older brothers and my sister went for 11 years and then graduated. I think during or after World War II, they changed to a 12-year system. When my next two brothers and my next older sister graduated, it was 12 years.

Past the two classrooms was the large home economics building. It still looked like the individual classrooms but was about three times the size of the individual classrooms. When you walked in the front door, there was a living room that had a really nice wool rug on the floor and very nice living-room type furniture. I remember a baby grand piano being in there. Over to the left was the home-making department where you had class. The sewing room was a large room with big worktables where you could cut fabric and small tables for the sewing machines and lots of windows on both sides of the room.

SMITH: Do you think that was for air circulation as well as light?

PHILLIPS: Yes. These were large, large windows; not house-sized but much bigger than that. I remember the walls were cream-colored stucco, which was kind of alien to me because the house we lived in didn't have stucco walls.

I don't remember how you left the sewing room to go to a large kitchen. I don't remember what the stove or stoves looked like – there may have been more than one. But there were big work surfaces in there and a big sink. There were times when the older home economic students prepared meals for special occasions. I don't remember what the occasions were and I don't think they did it too often, but it was school related occasions. We also had a butler's pantry where the dishes were kept. There was a counter with cabinets below, glass doors above. It was really quite well done. A lot of thought had gone into it. It was beginning to get a little shabby simply because of age but you could still tell it was quality.

When I was a sophomore or a senior we got a new homemaking teacher. She had us get down on our hands and knees and actually scrub the tile floor. (laughter) I learned a lot from her...and we didn't mind.

SMITH: Did you wear aprons or just have your school clothes on while you were cooking and cleaning?

PHILLIPS: We really didn't do a whole lot of cooking. I don't remember if we wore aprons or not. We usually wore jeans so I guess it didn't really matter.

SMITH: You wore JEANS to school? Oh, my. When I was in school, girls weren't allowed to wear slacks. (laughing)

PHILLIPS: This was in the olden days, in the 1950s.

SMITH: You would think it would have been stricter back then!

PHILLIPS: We also wore skirts. We wore shorts in PE but not in class. Nothing was air-conditioned. I learned to do some baking there and learned about yeast. I think one semester you'd take sewing and one semester you'd take cooking.

SMITH: Was Home Economics required?

PHILLIPS: No. It was an elective.

SMITH: And the bookkeeping/typing was an elective as well?

PHILLIPS: Yes. I took typing and bookkeeping, and Spanish which was also an elective. We didn't have an art program, which I always missed because I was interested in art. That was something I really wanted to do but they didn't have it. We didn't have a library in Sugar Land, either, except the school library.

SMITH: Did you have a bookmobile?

PHILLIPS: We finally got a bookmobile but did not have it when I was in elementary school. During World War II, you didn't have anything like that. When I was in the 1st grade, the building had little tables and two people could sit at them. I think you kept your books in the space under the little seat.

SMITH: I think we did, too. I think we sat two to a table in 1st grade.

PHILLIPS: I'm trying to remember if there was a little shelf underneath where you kept things like paste. There was a little groove where you kept your pencils and our teacher, Miss Johnson, would only let you use big, fat, round pencils.

SMITH: We called them horse leg pencils. And a Big Chief tablet!

PHILLIPS: Yes! And Crayolas. In 1st grade you could have only the single-layer package of crayons. I think you had to wait until 2nd grade for the two-layer package of crayons. Then when you got the big square box with all those wonderful colors, the 64 pack, I think, you had to be older. You had to have paste, the white kind that had a little wooden stick that you used to put the paste on. Then you used your fingers (laughing).

SMITH: And then you licked your fingers! (laughing)

PHILLIPS: I didn't do that! Maybe I did it once but I didn't do it a second time.

Blackboards were still black back then, and Miss Johnson always had a chamois cloth. She would erase what was written on the board with the eraser, and then she took her chamois cloth and cleaned ALL the dust off the blackboard. The blackboards were so shiny that if the light hit it just right, it was hard to read because of the glare.

SMITH: Did you clean the erasers after school?

PHILLIPS: I don't think we did in the 1st grade, but in the upper grades, that was a treat. It was an honor to be chosen to go out and pop the erasers. We would either pop them together to get the dust out, or we would make designs on the sidewalk with the dust.

SMITH: We weren't smart enough to make designs!

PHILLIPS: Well, I wanted art! (much laughter)

Miss Johnson was an old maid schoolteacher. I guess she grew up in Sugar Land. Miss Johnson wore dresses that came almost to her ankles with no fullness to the dresses; very straight. And prints. She wore the black shoes with the thick heels and they laced up. All the women wore them back then. That was what was in style. You didn't see too many women in high heels. These were comfortable leather shoes.

In the front of the room was a large table, the size of a work table, but it was made out of galvanized metal. The top was sunken in and full of sand. She had all these wonderful little things where you could dig a hole and get to the bottom of the sand and you'd make lakes and roads. You had cars and little buildings. It was absolutely wonderful. She also had a tiny, little library where on rainy days when not many kids made it to school, and the lights were on because it was so dark outside, she would read us stories from those books. There would be only four or five kids there on those days. I always tried to make an effort to go to school on those days even when it was pouring rain and I had to walk to school. I LOVED the light and the stories. I remember one of the stories she read – I have no idea what the name of the book was – but the little girl in the story had gotten a new frock. I had NO IDEA what a frock was! I had never heard the term in my six years. (laughing)

SMITH: Did you ever have a frock?

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes, I had frocks. But we called them dresses. (laughing) Little girls wore very short dresses back then.

SMITH: Lots of petticoats?

PHILLIPS: No, not yet, that was later. We just wore almost an A-line shape. You would have little gathered skirts, also. You did wear petticoats but they were slips, not the fluffy, net ones. The little boys usually wore overalls to school.

SMITH: Did they wear short pants?

PHILLIPS: No, they wore long pants. Sometimes they wore khakis. The poorer kids wore overalls. I don't remember them wearing short pants. You could come to school barefooted but after a short time they found out the kids would come to school with their shoes on and then take their shoes off, and then they'd lose them! So if you came to school with shoes on, you had to keep them on. But if you came to school barefooted, that was okay. I'm sure some kids didn't have money for shoes back then. This was right after the Depression, during World War II and there were really poor children in that school. Probably we were too, but I didn't know it. We really didn't have any money. We didn't have a car.

When you walked in the back of the room where the double doors were, there were these little anterooms and on either side of that were cloakrooms (coatrooms) where you hung your outdoor wear on a hook and above that was a little shelf where you put your lunch. We had steam radiators for heat and in the winter you could walk back into that cloakroom and some of those baloney and salami sandwiches with onion on them would absolutely knock your head off. Many of the children lived out in the country where you didn't have electricity but had kerosene lamps, and wood or kerosene stoves to cook on. They would come in with their coats and they smelled like kerosene. We were used to it. Now I think I might be offended by some of those odors!

SMITH: Did they have buses to pick up the children who lived out of town?

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

SMITH: And you lived just across 90A where the bank is now?

PHILLIPS: There were two houses there and we lived in one of them. We lived further out 90A past Alkire Lake, in a little farmhouse earlier. It was moved so they could build the second half of Highway 90A. During WW II, 90A was a two-lane highway. It became four lanes in the 1940s, after the War. I remember them building it.

Back to the school, these cloakrooms were there and across the back she had some little wooden boxes that stood on end and had a little rod across them. She had these little dolls, made out of cotton stockings or socks, and they had embroidered faces, and yarn hair. They had all these clothes and there were little coat hangers there. You could play with these dolls. I don't remember how many dolls there were. Surely there were three or four. After you played with them, you had to hang up the clothes. I'm sure the books were hers, the sand table was hers, and the dolls were hers. She always had these wonderful red rubber balls. They weren't clear red; they were rubber red. You pumped them up with air. They were SO much fun!

SMITH: How big around were they?

PHILLIPS: They were maybe soccer ball sized; smaller than a basketball. Of course when you are six years old – they might not have been as big as I thought they were! (laughing) They were wonderful because they bounced so. She would sing and skip. We would sing these little songs and sometimes we'd push our tables back and do these little dances. I remember one of the little songs we learned was "A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go; we'll catch a fox and put it in a box, and then we'll let it go." It was a reel, where you would line up facing each other. There would be one or two people who would skip between these two rows of people facing each other. And that's when you would sing "A-hunting we will go". Then they would part and circle around the outside of the two lines and the lines would follow behind them and then the next two people would be at the front of the line. To this day I remember this song and how it worked. And you skipped. She would show us how to do it. I was scared to death of her. I thought she must have been 200 years old. She WAS much older than most of the teachers were. But I'm sure I thought she was much older than she really was. She taught for a number of years after I got out of high school! So that tells you something.

In the 2nd grade my teacher was Mrs. Brawner, and we were in the second building. The next year, the class behind me was so big they had to divide it, so I was in a class with 3rd graders and 2nd graders. And I had the same teacher again.

SMITH: Did they have 2nd graders on one side of the room and 3rd graders on the other?

PHILLIPS: Yes. They would give you an assignment and you would be working on that while they taught the other side of the room.

SMITH: Similar to the one-room schoolhouse days.

PHILLIPS: Yes. During the summertime you forgot everything you learned – the first year any way! (laughing) I don't think I was ever in the 3rd building. Then I was in the 4th grade room and by then I had developed pretty good handwriting. I don't think we learned cursive until the 3rd grade. I think we printed until then. In each room there were these cardboard pieces with lines on them, with all the letters written out, with a dotted line in the middle so you knew lower case didn't go above that unless it was a "t" or "b" or a letter that was "tall". Even those letters didn't go all the way to the top like the capital letters did.

SMITH: Did you learn the Parker "r" or the regular "r"?

PHILLIPS: You could use the Parker "r" if the word ended in "r", but that wasn't what we were taught. And we still weren't using ink. In 2nd grade, you really came up in the world because you could use a #2 pencil. You didn't have to use the big, fat pencil. AND you could have more Crayolas. We could use something besides the Big Chief tablets. I remember each year, when we would get our school supplies; I would absolutely inhale the Crayolas. I LOVED the smell. I would open my box and smell them. I loved that wax smell. It was wonderful! In 3rd grade you could get that big box.

SMITH: I didn't get that big box until I was 10 or 11! But I had it at home. I don't remember taking crayons to school.

PHILLIPS: We had our little list of supplies and crayons were on it.

SMITH: Did you have a watercolor box with paint in it?

PHILLIPS: The only time we had those the school furnished them.

SMITH: I think instead of Crayolas, we had paint. I don't remember taking crayons to school but we had paints. It was a black box and you opened it up and it had little separate wells in the lid for you to put your water in, and when you got older, you got more colors in your paint box.

PHILLIPS: We may have had watercolor paint but I don't remember using those.

SMITH: We had tempera paints at school.

PHILLIPS: We had that, too. We had those wonderful primary colors, and green, white and black. You mixed your colors from that. We had mimeographed sheets. There is a gelatin-like substance in a flat wooden box and it had a very strange odor. You would take a marking pen that was purple and you would draw or write what you wanted, on an 8-1/2" by 11" sheet of paper. Then when you got through with it, you put the paper on top of the gelatin and rub your hand on the back of it. Then you would peel that off. Then taking a clean sheet of paper and rub it on top of that with your hand, and then lift it off. Then it would be right-side up because you had reversed it. I think they are still around.

In 4th grade, Miss Lawrence was my teacher. She had a nose twitch. She would talk and then she would wiggle her nose. All the kids were kind of transfixed with this. When I was going to school, you thought your teachers were deities. You really looked up to them and thought they knew everything. There weren't many kids who would talk back to the teacher. Our classes were very small, around 20; and that was the entire grade! By then I had pretty good handwriting; there were several of us who she would ask us to write things on the blackboard for her.

When I was in the 4th grade, my father was injured in an accident while I was in school. Mr. Borden, the superintendent, came into the room, and talked to the teacher, and then he came to me. I was terrified of the man. He was a big, older man and I was scared to death of him. He asked me to go outside with him and I was terrified, and rightfully so, because he told me my father had been injured and was in the hospital. I could walk over to the hospital because it was right behind the school. When I got outside, my sister, who was three years older than I, was already there. I was taking a test when this happened. So I walked over to the hospital with my sister. My mother came out of the room. I didn't get to see my dad. She told me he had been in this accident and it was grave. There wasn't much hope. So I walked back to school with my sister and went back to my class because there wasn't anybody for me to stay with. My grandmother and my mother were in the room with my dad; my older brothers were in the Navy and not at home. My oldest sister was also gone at the time.

When I came back into the room, the teacher told me that the class had decided that they would take up a collection and send flowers to my dad in the hospital. I told her he wasn't going to live, and she didn't know what to do. He died two days later and I got through that year and then I went into the 5th grade with Miss Glasscock. I don't remember too much about Miss Glasscock. Evidently it was rather uneventful.

The next year I was in the 6th grade in Miss Hall's class. She had absolutely terrible handwriting. She never wrote on the blackboard! She always had one of the students do it. She kept a Bible on her desk, which would be forbidden nowadays, but back then, no one thought anything about it. You were not allowed to lean on the Bible or put anything on top of it. You were scolded if you did.

SMITH: When school started, did you say the Pledge of Allegiance?

PHILLIPS: Oh, yes, you said the Pledge and it didn't have "under God" in it at that time. That was put in, in President Eisenhower's time.

SMITH: Did you do the Texas Pledge? We never did.

PHILLIPS: I don't remember the Texas Pledge. We'd sing America the Beautiful.

SMITH: Did you have quiet time after lunch? We had quiet time and often the teacher would read to us and sometimes we would take a little nap.

PHILLIPS: I think we did that in the 1st and 2nd grade but I don't think we did that.

SMITH: We did it in 5th grade!

PHILLIPS: I think the teacher needed the rest! (laughter) She'd probably been on duty at the cafeteria. She needed some down time.

I can remember, when I was in the 1st grade and I didn't know anything else, the recess bell always rang loudly. It wasn't a handheld bell; it was an automatic bell. In Miss Johnson's class, the girls had a restroom on one side of the building and the boys had one on the other side. There was a little door that went right back to this little restroom that was actually outside the building. There was a little pavement area in front of it and you went in one at a time.

In Miss Johnson's class, you didn't have a choice. You went to the restroom. Now this was 1st grade and there were some children who weren't quite potty-trained yet. You lined up – she would tell you where to start. Each time someone different was chosen to be first in line. Once you were finished, you could go out and play in the play yard but not until then. I used to wonder why all these kids were playing out in the play yard and we were still in there, going to the restroom. Come to find out, none of the other classes did that! When the bell rang, you could go out and play and you went to the restroom during recess.

We had these seesaws – two sets of them. One was on one side of the semicircle and the other on the opposite end. The swings had these big trenches underneath them where you pushed with your feet. Every summer they filled the trenches. There was a live oak tree there and we would get in the swing and push each other. We'd jump high and grab the swing and give it a push. We would try to see who could swing the highest.

SMITH: To touch the branch of that oak tree! (laughter)

PHILLIPS: It was easier when we were there because that tree had grown quite a bit by the time you were there. Sometimes they would swing you so high that the swing would free fly and it would pop you when you got to the highest point! In this picture that I showed you of the circle, there is this big metal post that doesn't have anything on it. This had like trapeze chains and a metal thing to grab hold of. You would run in a circle and then you would pick your feet up and it would swing you around. Somebody turned loose of it and it hit a little girl and killed her. So they took the chains and the trapeze type things down, but the pole remained. It was very shiny.

In the mornings we would play before class started. The covered walkways had these columns that held up the cover and were set in such a way that they formed a square. We would play "post". This was handed down from generation to generation. You would get five kids, one on each post and one in the middle. The kids on the post would reach out and touch the other person's hand and you would switch posts. If the person in the middle could get to your post before you got to it, then you ended up in the middle. We also played a game called "bear". Somebody is it and you chase them until you catch them. It was tag but for some reason we called it "bear".

SMITH: Because there were so many bears in Sugar Land! Were you born in Sugar Land?

PHILLIPS: No. I was born in Brenham. My mother went to school in Sugar Land and she quit school in the 7th grade, which was not uncommon in Europe. Her family came from Austria in 1913 and emigrated to San Antonio, then lived in Skidmore and then came to Sugar Land. That's where my mother met my father who had emigrated from Germany. Two of his brothers were already living in Sugar Land. They came before World War I started. My mother was nine when she came to this country. I don't know how old she was when she met my dad.

Interview ends