

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Marilyn Reed Nichols Henslee**

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Interviewer: Rosie Moore

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

Location St. Johns United Methodist Church, Richmond, Texas 13 Pages



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Transcript

MOORE: Well thanks so much for taking the time to come by and talk with me today.

HENSLEE: I am glad to.

MOORE: Let's start with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

HENSLEE: I was born in Saint Joseph's infirmary in Houston, Texas, June 20, 1926, in Houston. It's still there.

MOORE: What brought you to the Fort Bend County area?

HENSLEE: My father was a doctor. They were looking for a doctor down here so he had decided to come and see. They liked it, and they stayed.

MOORE: Where in Fort Bend County did you grow up?

HENSLEE: In Richmond.

MOORE: So you've lived here practically...

HENSLEE: I left after I married and didn't come back for forty-two years. (chuckle)

MOORE: Oh, wow. Tell me about the Richmond area as you knew it growing up.

HENSLEE: It was small, it was friendly, we knew everybody and they knew us (laughing). It was a great place to grow up.

MOORE: What made it a great place to grow up?

HENSLEE: I think the people. Just learning how to do the right thing and the wrong thing.

MOORE: Tell me a little bit about your childhood, going to school here in Richmond.

HENSLEE: I mainly remember recess (laughing) and some of the teachers.

MOORE: How did the races get along at that time? You grew up during a segregated period.

HENSLEE: Very much, yea. There were no black children in the school at all. I don't remember having a Spanish person until high school. There weren't very many of them. I guess if they came and knew English, they got along fine. The black children had their own school.

MOORE: Was it the same with neighborhoods as well growing up?

HENSLEE: Yes, very much. There was a white town and colored town. Instead of men and women rest rooms, there was white and black.

MOORE: Things have changed since then.

HENSLEE: Thank heavens.

MOORE: I'd like to learn a little bit more about your family. What type of work did your father do?

HENSLEE: He was a physician and surgeon.

MOORE: How about your grandfather?

HENSLEE: My grandfather was in Lampasas, Texas. He was a brick mason. In fact, he built my mother and father's house, which is still standing and still does not have a crack in it.

MOORE: What year was that built?

HENSLEE: (laughing) Oh, goodness, I don't know. I was eight or nine years old, I guess.

MOORE: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

HENSLEE: I have one sister, her name is Ann Fowler.

MOORE: Does she live in Richmond, too?

HENSLEE: No, she lives in Caney, Oklahoma, with her son. She is bed-fast, and they take care of her there.

MOORE: Tell me about your mom, what type of work did your mom do?

HENSLEE: She was a registered nurse.

MOORE: You come from a medical profession.

HENSLEE: Yes, I do.

MOORE: How about your grandmother, what did she do?

HENSLEE: I only knew one of my grandmothers. My mother's mother died when my mother was sixteen. That's why I never knew her, but the other one died in the thirties from a stroke. So, I really didn't have much knowledge of a grandmother.

MOORE: Tell me about the home that you grew up in Richmond, Texas. Was it a big home, small home?

HENSLEE: They were renting an apartment when I was born. They had an upstairs apartment, and at that time, I don't think the streets had names. I don't remember that they did. We lived in a little house that's right here off Fourth Street, right next to the Randall house, which was across from the Catholic Church. It's still there and they have kept it up and improved it. It is still a rental house; the Randall family right next door owned it. They rented it to us, and they took care of Ann, and I when mother and daddy needed them. There is a courthouse, and then the next block there is a house on the corner, and then a little white house that's on the corner.

MOORE: When you drive by this area, I bet it brings back a lot of memories when you were growing up.

HENSLEE: Oh, yea, and we walked everywhere.

MOORE: Besides the Randall's, what other families lived near you?

HENSLEE: The Birdwells, the Shannons, and the Davis family.

MOORE: Do you still keep in touch?

HENSLEE: I talked to Wister Shannon, who lives in Kerrville. He's my sister's age. He keeps in touch. I call him and he calls me, you know? I haven't seen him in years, but we still talk on the phone about twice a month.

MOORE: So when you were growing up in Richmond, where did your family shop?

HENSLEE: Downtown. Right here (chuckle). Mainly grocery stores and the Ideal Café and the hotel there, but nobody ever knew anybody that went there, because everybody stayed at home. I guess they had visiting salesman. Edelstein's was a dry goods store and the fashion outlet, you know?

MOORE: Did you mostly shop in Richmond, or did you go to Houston to do shopping?

HENSLEE: We mostly shopped in Richmond, but for some things you went to Houston. As we got older we went to Houston more for our clothes.

MOORE: When you grew up, what did your family do for entertainment?

HENSLEE: I remember on Sundays we'd go to church and Sunday school. The Andrew Briscoes had five children. The Birdwells had one, and we had two in our family. The Briscoes lived out in the country, but we'd go to Sunday school and church, then all go to one house or the other and eat. The parents would play bridge and we were supposed to nap or do whatever kids did. We all learned to play Bridge that way.

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Mason Briscoe's interview on the FBC Historical Commission website at <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=37309>

MOORE: It seems that Bridge was a popular game back then.

HENSLEE: Oh, it still is. Billie Wendt and I still play together (laughing).

EDITOR'S NOTE: See three interviews with Billie Wendt on the FBC Historical Commission website at <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=30614>, <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=30616>, and <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=30618>.

Jack Wendt was also interviewed. His interview is on the FBC Historical Commission website at <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=30464>

MOORE: Well, I talked to Billie, and she was telling me about Bridge. She'd play it for three hours. I said three hours, seems very long. She says, "Well, we don't think of it as that long."

HENSLEE: No, it doesn't seem that long when you're playing.

MOORE: What kind of hobbies did your parents have? Were they into music?

HENSLEE: Not a lot. My dad bought some land out here, and he used to like to play gentleman farmer, I guess. It was just fun, the Briscoes and Birdwells and mother and dad would spend Sunday all day together. We would come in the evening, and go to church Sunday evening. Then everybody would go home.

MOORE: It was very close knit growing up. Where did you go to church?



St. John's United Methodist Church in Richmond, Texas, is a unique and very distinctive building of architectural history. Completed in 1922, the church is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic as an excellent example of an intact Gothic Revival church.

--courtesy of the US National Park Service

HENSLEE: Right here, Saint Johns United Methodist Church. I was baptized here.

MOORE: Wow!. This church has been around for a long time.

HENSLEE: It was a smaller church, very intimate. Everybody knew everybody, just like a small town. It was friendly and warm, and at that time, all the kids came here.

MOORE: I bet when you walk into this church, it brings back so many memories.

HENSLEE: Oh, yea. For instance, right across the street where the post office and pharmacy are, my dad's first office was upstairs, right above the post office. Right in that corner. Then he moved. This corner was a grocery store, and he had a little office right next door to that. So that middle coming into the church is about where my father's office was (laughing). I feel like I'm on home ground here.

MOORE: Tell me a little bit about your schooling here in Richmond?

HENSLEE: There was only one. The high school was Mirabeau B. Lamar High School.

MOORE: Only one school!

HENSLEE: We had one elementary school and one high school. There were no junior highs.

MOORE: What was your favorite subject in school?

HENSLEE: History, I loved history. I liked knowing about people who came before. It was fun.

MOORE: Do any classmates or teachers come to mind?

HENSLEE: I don't know of any teachers of mine that are still around. My class still has a reunion. We just had our 69th last year. There were thirteen of us that came along with various spouses and sons and daughters that brought people. There still are quite a few of us. About five years ago, we decided to meet every year because we were losing so many. We used to meet about every three or four years.

MOORE: After you went to your elementary and high school, where did you go to college?

HENSLEE: I went to Hock Bay Junior College in Dallas, and then I went to the University of Texas at Austin.

MOORE: What did you major in?

HENSLEE: Psychology. (laughing) I got married as soon as I graduated. I minored in history because I still loved it, still do. I am a Longhorn (laughing).

MOORE: You started a family soon?

HENSLEE: Yes. I have two children, a son, Mark, who is a minister, lives in Oklahoma. My daughter, Janice, lives in Addison. She has been a Special Education teacher for over thirty years now.

MOORE: Where did you meet your husband?

HENSLEE: At the University of Texas in Austin. He's a geologist, he's still living. He's in Amarillo, we divorced in 1984.

MOORE: While you were married, did you spend most of your time rearing the kids?

HENSLEE: Yes, until they got nearly to college age, and then I started working for doctors in Amarillo.

MOORE: You can't get away from the medical profession.

HENSLEE: No, because we wanted our kids to go to college. College was never an option with us. We expected our kids to go to college, and we were determined that they'd come out with a degree. They both have masters, and my son has the divinity degree. So, it's been well worth it.

MOORE: How many grandchildren do you have?

HENSLEE: I have six grandchildren. Our son was born in Sugar Land. He was born in January, and Harold finished school in January of 1950. We had nowhere to go because he was just getting out of school, so I came home and stayed here with mom and dad until he was born. Harold got out of college and got a degree, and then we moved to Amarillo which is Harold's home. I lived there 42 years. I moved back in 1992, so 20 (chuckle).

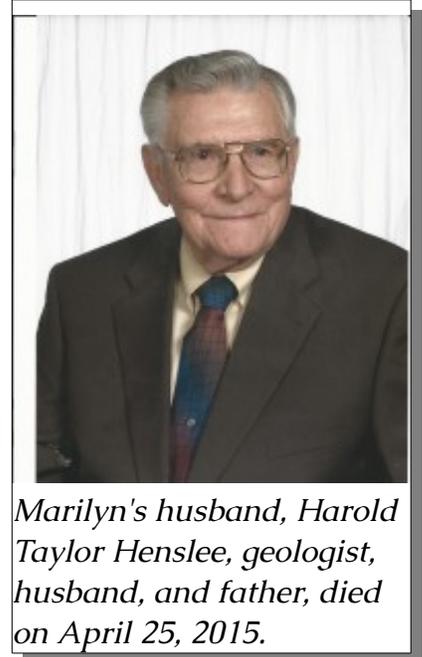
MOORE: What's your most vivid memory about growing up in the city of Richmond?

HENSLEE: That was fun years and close relationships. Good friends. A happy time. In spite of World War II, it was a good time.

MOORE: Did you keep animals or herds or...

HENSLEE: Later years, dad had the farm out across the river, and he had pecan trees, grafted a lot of pecan trees, so we had pecans. Then he raised chickens for a little while. It was just kind of his outlet, I guess. Plus, he was going to every sporting event known to man, and we went along. We were taken to everything. Everybody laughs at Ann and me because we are such sport fans. We needed to learn about sports because if we hadn't learned something about it, we would have been bored to death because we were going to the games...period! (laughing)

MOORE: What kind of sports?



Marilyn's husband, Harold Taylor Henslee, geologist, husband, and father, died on April 25, 2015.

HENSLEE: Softball, baseball, football, he didn't care for basketball all that much. Anything that was sports. Mainly, he was a baseball player, my dad was, at the University of Texas, many years ago.

MOORE: Were you athletic when you were in school?

HENSLEE: No, I was in the band.

MOORE: What instrument did you play?

HENSLEE: Drums.

MOORE: How did you get into that?

HENSLEE: Started on clarinet, but I liked drums better. (laughing) Music was a big thing then to everyone. That's the time of the big orchestras and beautiful music, great dancing.

MOORE: What are some of the major changes that you have seen in the Richmond area? If you were to compare that time to today, what are some things that you have noticed?

HENSLEE: I think... them moving out of the grocery stores... downtown their struggle to keep it alive and going, I think. We had a dime store, and it was a busy place. You walked along the streets, and knew everybody, and said hello and stopped to talk.

MOORE: What do you think of Richmond today?

HENSLEE: I still love it. I mainly shop around here, or when I am out of town. Until the last couple of years, I use to drive back to Amarillo and to Dallas by myself. Everybody said, "OH, don't do that." It didn't bother me at all. I said as long as I had my phone and my gun, I was fine.

MOORE: You're very independent. (both laughing)

MOORE: Do you remember the population of Richmond when you were growing up?

HENSLEE: I guess in 1940 it was 2,026. I don't know why that has always stuck in my mind. But now it's over 10,000 now.

MOORE: Were your parents originally from Richmond?

HENSLEE: No, no. My father came from Lampasas, Texas, and my mother came from Peoria, which is a little town by Hillsboro, Texas. He was hired as a doctor. He was an MD, medical doctor, physician, surgeon. He had gone to the University of Texas Medical School in Galveston, and then he interned at Scott and White in Austin. My mother was a nurse at Scott and White. She had been trained there and was a surgical nurse. That's where they met.

MOORE: Did they come from big families?

HENSLEE: My mother had four brothers and a half sister. My dad had one brother.

MOORE: I guess growing up you got used to the trains traveling, right? (train going by)

HENSLEE: Yea (chuckle). You get to where you don't even hear them, but you always heard them during church. They used to have a red light here in this corner, and it was just terrible hearing those trucks trying to put on their breaks, and the preacher would be talking.

MOORE: Was there only one hospital in Richmond?

HENSLEE: There was no hospital at that time. Later on, they got one out between Richmond and Rosenberg. They had one in Rosenberg that burned. There was a hospital in Sugar Land that Sugarland Industries ran. But most people did not go to the hospital. I remember one time my dad was charging fifteen dollars to deliver a baby, and he was trying to get people to come in for prenatal care, but they wouldn't. Usually it was a home delivery.

He would go and just stay until the baby came once they went into labor. He went past Sugar Land over in Blue Ridge, I think it was called. Sometimes he was gone two or three days. (Chuckling) It was hard, he worked so hard to get this hospital here. He was so happy when A. P. George called him and told them they were going to give money to build a hospital. Polly Ryon was the first one here.

EDITOR'S NOTE: On July 23, 1947, community leaders met at the A. P. George farm for the purpose of organizing and establishing a hospital in Fort Bend County. The George's donated 25 acres of land as the site of the hospital. The hospital opened on January 15, 1950, with fifty-one fully equipped beds.

The facilities of Polly Ryan Hospital were expanded over the years. In 2004, Polly Ryan Memorial Hospital changed its name to OakBend Medical Center.

MOORE: Tell us about the Depression.

HENSLEE: The main things I remember about the Depression were the tramps that would come to the back door. I think they knew who would feed them if they had anything at all. They never over-did it, and they always did some chore or another. There weren't any freeloaders as we call them today.

They would come, they would take a meal, and then they would maybe sweep the driveway or weed the flower beds or just do something to make them feel like they were paying a little bit for their meal. They were never anything but kind that I saw.



Unemployed men outside a soup kitchen opened by Al Capone in Depression-era Chicago, Illinois, U. S. in 1931.

--courtesy Wikipedia

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic depression that took place mostly during the 1930s, beginning in the United States. The timing of the Great Depression varied across nations; in most countries it started in 1929 and lasted until the late-1930s. It began after the stock market crash of October 1929, which sent Wall Street into a panic and wiped out millions of investors.

MOORE: You miss the old Richmond, I guess?

HENSLEE: Yes, I do, but you can't go back to that. It's going to grow and change. You just hope some of that feeling of closeness will stay in the church or in the home with people. It's so hard to go and not know all these people.

MOORE: When I walk after I attend church here at eleven, I like the historic Richmond feel. When I walk around and see these antique shops here, kind of makes me feel that I'm taking a journey back into time.

HENSLEE: Have you gone out to Morton Cemetery and looked around out there at the graves? It's really got some historical places and funny things. (laughter)

MOORE: Is there a water tower that was back there when you were growing up?

HENSLEE: It's right behind us here, yeah. We used to climb it every now and then. There use to be a swimming pool right on the side of it that we all swam in. I really hated it when they closed the swimming pool, but by then I was pretty well past all the swimming we did as kids.

MOORE: The courthouse was here. What other structures were here?

HENSLEE: All this downtown except the George Foundation building, they rebuilt that. They tore down that building and built that. These buildings are the same. Just the front part of the church was here at that time. You can tell where they built on. Then we had the house next door. There was another house in-between there, and it's out in the country now, somewhere (laughs) on FM 359. I believe it is still out there and that used to be where the minister lived when I was growing up. That's not there. The Randall house is still there and the rent house, the courthouse...

MOORE: That was the neighbor who lived near Fourth Street?

HENSLEE: Mr. Randall, we called him Buddy Car, or Car, and he rang the clock. He would go up in the bell tower and strike the clock. He also ran the swimming pool. He was in charge of the swimming pool. When he spoke you minded! (chuckle).

MOORE: So the swimming pool was here. What takes the place of the swimming pool now?

HENSLEE: The water tower was there, and right in the back part of that lot was the swimming pool on this side. The street and the swimming pool were right there. The front part was vacant, and then years later they built City Hall there. The Blue Jay monument was there when I was growing up, it's been there all these years. It was a memorial to a fight.

MOORE: Of what organizations have you been a member?

HENSLEE: Here in Richmond, I'm a member of the Richmond Garden Club and the Rosenberg Women's Club. Church, right here Saint John's.

MOORE: What do you do in the garden club?

HENSLEE: We do things like put benches over here in this little garden and along the streets. We do things around the Moore home. We plant flowers and put statues, and we also donate money to the Morton Cemetery, and beautify and make things pretty.

MOORE: Do you see your children often?

HENSLEE: My son is a Presbyterian minister. My daughter, Janice, is married, and her married name is Mixson. She's got four children. I have three great grandsons, aged nine, five and four. Brandon lives in Friday Harbor, Washington. Brandon Brown is his name. Atticus lives in Austin, and Caden lives in Plano, Texas.

MOORE: This area used to be a bunch of pecan trees before houses were built.

HENSLEE: Yes, dad's farm was out off FM 359. I can't remember the subdivision now, it is a big subdivision, big homes. That used to be ours and Amelia Briscoe's. Amelia Belle Briscoe who was a great and close friend of mine all my life, just like Martha Payton. The three of us were quite a threesome (joyful chuckle). Martha Payton and I were talking the other day about when the black cooks would come to work early in the morning. They walked down in front of my house on Seventh Street. They all walked, about five of them, in the center of the street, and as they'd come to their houses or their block where they worked, they'd just peel off. Then the rest just went on, and it was the same process when they went home after lunch (chuckling). I used to love to hear them come 'cause I loved every one of them. They were dear, wonderful people and very kind to us.

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Martha Payton's interview on the FBC Historical Commission Web Site at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=26442>

Sugar Land was smaller than Richmond in the early days, and I know we had boyfriends over there. There were three of us. If one of us got a car, we'd go to Sugar Land to see them, but then gas was rationed and everything else, so it was a little hard to go eight miles to Sugar Land (laughing).

MOORE: Is there anything that you want to add further about Richmond or Fort Bend County?

HENSLEE: I still think it's a great place to be. I hate it that some of the trees and everything are gone, cut down...gone. I would love to see some of that back. It used to be when you came into town on highway 90-A, the trees were all across. Tree lined roads and it was just beautiful. The truckers did not like it. (chuckle)

MOORE: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

HENSLEE: No...I am just glad you're doing this.

MOORE: Thank you very much for your time. It was great to travel back into time. Like you said, you didn't know too much about your grandparents.

HENSLEE: I knew my grandfather, Dr. Clarence Virgil Nichols. My son was born in Sugar Land there. Dr. Jenkins and my dad were in the delivery room talking to me, but Dr. Jenkins delivered him in 1950, a week before they opened Polly Ryon Memorial Hospital. My father was the first head of the medical part of the hospital there.

MOORE: And you still attend this church after all these years?

HENSLEE: Yes.

MOORE: That's great, I love this church.

HENSLEE: I still love this church. Ann and I gave a window in the back part here off of Wendt Hall for our parents years ago when they were building the addition, so it was fun. Good thing to do. (laughing)

MOORE: Thank you so much.

Interview ends