

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Mason Briscoe II**

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Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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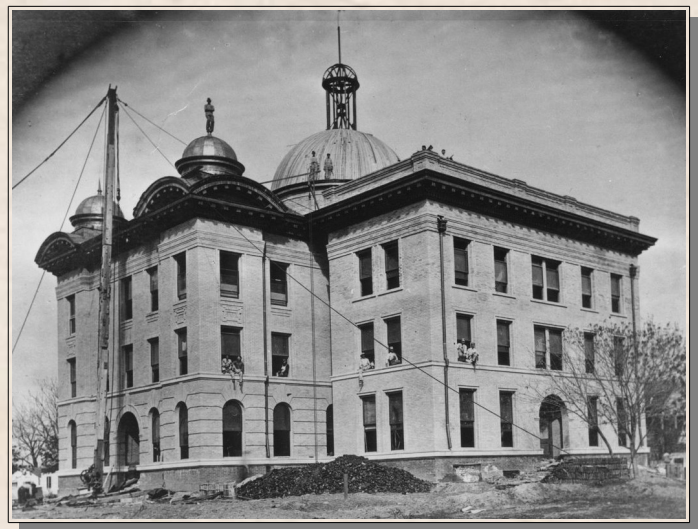
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Transcript

TERRELL: Could tell me a little bit about your family history?

BRISCOE: Okay. There was a General Parmenas Briscoe in Mississippi who had nine boys. And every time one of them got into trouble, he sent him to Texas. And five of them settled in Fort Bend County. The land that I grew up on was part of a land grant that belonged to another man, who wanted to go back to the North. And he sold this land grant to my grandparents for \$1.00 an acre, 1600 acres, just north of Rosenberg.

My grandfather on my father's side, died before I was born or right after I was born. He was involved in the flood, out there in the country, and got wet and stayed wet I think, for several days, and got pneumonia and never recovered. My grandmother on my father's side, died also before I was born. I was born in 1924, in the country home, out about six miles north of Rosenberg. My father was the youngest of ten children, four of which did not reach maturity. Six reached maturity. My uncle, Mason, the one I'm named after, was the oldest, and he was born in 1883. When his father died he was at A&M. He quit and came home to run the place, and did a tremendous job.

There were four girls. Nora never married, I think she looked after the others for him. Susie married Frank Williford from Houston, who was later district judge in Harris County. Georgie, who married Dolph Briscoe from Uvalde and their son was governor of Texas, in the late '80s I think. And the youngest was Mary, who lived here in Rosenberg, and had four children. She's been dead now for probably ten years.

My father was the youngest, and like I say, he died in 1900. My mother's side came from Mississippi and for a while, stayed at the Sartartia Plantation, which is about a mile or two or three toward Houston from Richmond. Later he lived in Richmond, and then they lived in Rosenberg, and he ran a store. A supply place here in Rosenberg. My grandmother lived for many years, and I don't remember how old she was, but it was after the World War II before she died.

My dad and mother had five children. The oldest was Andrew. He became a lawyer here in the Richmond-Rosenberg area. I was number two, and I did a number of things which I'll talk about later. My younger brothers were twins, Bill and Frank. Frank became a lawyer and was later District Attorney in Harris County. Bill could not hear very well, and could not communicate, but he became a special Texas Ranger who looked after various specific jobs. I went to World War II, was wounded, came home after two years in Europe and then went back to A&M.

Amazingly enough I started school when I was three, in a little one-teacher school north of Rosenberg in The Foster Community. She had six students that year, my older brother, Andy, the four Phillips children and me. Now back about 1900, this school had up to twenty kids. But they got down to none, and closed up for a number of years. And this was the first year they were back in operation. Andy and I stayed and I graduated from high school, Richmond High School, when I was thirteen years old. So I wasn't very old!

They kept me in Richmond another year just to get a little older. Then I got in A&M and was there when World War II started. I was in Guion Hall at a free movie on a Sunday afternoon when they announced that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. They immediately made many changes at A&M because at that time everybody

was required be in the Corps and were required to take army courses and so forth. That went on for about a year and then they started us going to school year-round. Dropping out and volunteering for the Air Force seemed to be a pretty popular deal. I was going to drop out too—but I wasn't old enough to get in the Air Force (slight chuckle while saying this), Army Air Force. The Navy was taking them at seventeen.

But anyway, I had six full semesters at A&M before I was eighteen, and I volunteered immediately after I was eighteen and went to Sam Houston—to Houston, to San Antonio, to the selection center and from there, since I'd had artillery ROTC at A&M, I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, which was artillery headquarters. They put us in a special section there to take special artillery, and said 'Now you go this three months here, and when you get through that, you'll go straight to OCS'.



*Mason Briscoe II, first row left
in front of Foster Creek School*

Well, about a week before that ended, they called us all together again, and they'd called out the whole senior class that was in the artillery at Texas A&M. They loaded up the artillery OTS (Officers Training School). 'Now, ya'll go out to load up and go'. We had some little time off, and we went up East and went overseas on an American-built LST, manned by the British. It was one of the ships that they'd built in the United States. And if you're familiar with LST, they are little boats. They are not but about 140 feet long, and twenty-two days, going to North Africa. And I was seasick twenty of them (chuckles) and lost forty pounds.

TERRELL: My goodness.

BRISCOE: Anyway, we recovered from that. We stayed there about three weeks, getting back on our feet. And then went further up North Africa, to get ready for the landing in Sicily. They loaded us all up and sent us to Italy and we got there the day after the landing was made in southern Italy, in Palermo. This was before the 1944 landing in France, about a year before. This was in September. And they assigned four of us to this one artillery battery—Battery C—171st Field Artillery Battalion, which was part of the Oklahoma National Guard. Now why they picked us and sent us to Oklahoma National Guard—when the Texas National Guard was coming right away... (chuckling)

I stayed with them and in November, a week after my nineteenth birthday, an artillery shell hit in our ammunition—uh—I'm tearing up. [chokes a bit with emotion]

TERRELL: Oh---

BRISCOE: I was not hurt bad. I was knocked unconscious, thank goodness, because the second shell hit even closer. And when I came to I thought I was on fire. I was wounded on the left side, with artillery particles. But anyway, I was not seriously injured and went to the hospital. It was a good thing they flew us back to North Africa from Italy to the hospital. While I was there, I had an emergency appendectomy, which would have been tough if I had been on the front.

But after that, I survived real good. (voice MUCH stronger now, not so emotional as last two paragraphs). Then I went back, got on my gun section again, those of us that had had the artillery training earlier could work and do things that some of the guys who had been in the Army four or five years could not do with the gun. We had 105 Howitzers, which would shoot a thirty-three pound projectile about six miles. Somewhere between five and six pretty accurately, and then beyond that, it was just a wild guess.

We went through Italy and we were in Rome when they landed in southern France. We had come up and gotten to Rome. We pushed off of Anzio where we were penned in. To give you an indication of how tough it was, the artillery observer stayed with the lead infantry companies. And at that time, I was working as an observer, with a lieutenant and a radio operator. The first day of the push off, this 180-190 man infantry company lost 80-odd men, one way or another. Some of them wounded, some of them killed, and some just gave up.

We, (pause), the officer gave up, that we were with. So the next day we went up, just the radio operator and I, and we fired directed fire. We would get reports from the observers as to which way to turn our guns to do their work. Anyway, we could do that and did, for a day, without an officer. And then they sent us another officer and this one didn't last a day. He went back before the day was over. And they sent us a third officer, and we were picking him up at the battery headquarters, and he gave up too. So we ran through three officers and they gave us four infantrymen to take back up to the front lines, exactly, to put in the infantry company that we were observing for.

We started off, up toward the front, and got pinned down in a patch of grain sorghum, I guess it was something like Sudan grass for hay or may have been oats, even. I'm not sure what it was, anymore. But we stayed flat on our sides; they had us pinned down pretty good. They could not get the guns down—their 88s they were shooting at us. And they were more rifles—they were not—our artillery like drop 'em down. So they could not (hit us) but they could thrash that grain up over our backs and we'd stick up a shirt every once in a while and they'd start shooting again. So we stayed there that whole afternoon, and then, after dark, got up and went on further forward, and got on a big creek and camped in. And it was six of us. Five of us got in a manhole, which was built for three, to sleep and one stayed outside, and we made the night.

The next morning we got up to get a drink—everybody was thirsty. The night before we had filled up our canteens from the creek, it was not running water. We'd filled up our canteens and all drank the water. The next morning looked down that ditch and about ten foot down there was a dead German in it. (chuckles) We survived that very well—no problem—just moved a little further down the ditch and got a little better water. No problem—we pushed off that day. We started moving, you know. Real good. And another team of observers came up and relieved us, and we went back to the battery and, if you ever sleep a clock around, that's what we did. Twenty-four hours, just give-out completely.

But anyway, we got up and we got to Rome, I got back on a gun. We got to Rome the day they landed in southern France. We were moving pretty good then, and we moved on up, around the—little bit— and then started training for landing in southern France. And made the landing there. They put our 105 Howitzers on ducks and we could fire while we were on the water. And we'd get on an LST that opened up in the front, and we'd just drive off in the water, and shoot our guns. Actually, we had no problem going in to southern France. They had jerked all their men up to the north, pretty well. And so we had no problems. But we were prepared. And we moved pretty fast in southern France. Kept going real good actually, the rest of the war except for a few hot spots. During the Battle of the Bulge we pulled up stationary and spread way out, on the southern end, right next to Switzerland. And stayed there for about two months, while the Battle of the Bulge was going on. Just to keep somebody from coming in from the back on them, so to speak.

Then we pulled out again and we moved. Nearly every day we moved some, and we had to hook our guns up and run. I did everything you can do in an artillery battery as an enlisted man. When the war was over, we were in Munich, Germany, and we'd been there about three days when the war ended and stayed there policing it for a while. When I came back to the Army, I got my discharge in October, and went back to A&M the next semester, in January.

TERRELL: And this was which year?

BRISCOE: That was '45 when we came back. And I graduated from A&M in '47. Some of the work I'd done before I went to the Army wasn't too good (chuckling). But anyway, we got back and got along real good. And I'd like to say one other thing about the World War II. My older brother, Andy, was in the Air Force. My younger brothers, the twins, Frank was in the Marines and Bill could do nothing. He finally got somebody to memorize the eye chart for him and he got in the Merchant Marines. So all four of us were in the Armed Service.

The first job I had when I finished A&M in agriculture was Assistant Agricultural Agent in Harris County, working with 4-H Club boys, some girls, and doing other work. I was an agronomy graduate and at that time Harris County had a lot of cotton, corn and rice. I worked with the crops a lot. I stayed there three years, doing that and became acquainted with the Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo during those three years, and served on different committees and so forth. I was Assistant Superintendent of the Brahman cattle—oh, the beef cattle—one year. Assistant Superintendent of the poultry one year.

I served as Superintendent of the dairy part of the show when the dairyman who was supposed to be superintendent had an emergency appendectomy and couldn't come. I enjoyed those years. I fell in love with the Houston Livestock Show.

I left Houston and went to be County Agent in DeWitt County, which is Cuero. And that was completely different. In Houston, we had a secretary and help if we needed it. At DeWitt there wasn't anybody but ME!

TERRELL: Oh my goodness. (chuckling) It was quite a change. I learned a lot about people and getting along with them, and such. It was quite an experience. I stayed there just one year and they moved me to Bay City, Matagorda County, as County Agent, which was rice, which I'd had no experience with at all, and cotton and corn and so forth, sorghums. I was there a year and had a secretary and an assistant county agent, and all. It made it real nice. Made a lot of good friends down there, still have them. And then I had an offer that I couldn't turn down and I went to the penitentiary for nine years, in charge of their livestock program; the beef cattle, the horses, the pigs, the poultry, all the livestock. My job was to provide the packing plant there with enough animals to where each inmate could be—an employee - could get three-quarters of a pound of meat a day.

TERRELL: Was that in Sugar Land?

BRISCOE: The agricultural headquarters were in Sugar Land, but we worked on all units. The four in Brazoria County, and one in Harris County, and then the four of them up above Huntsville. They had hired a new superintendent, O. B. Ellis, who was a real penitentiary man, and had really straightened out the Texas prison system at that time. He had a heart attack, I don't remember exactly what year, but for the last two years I was there, I was in charge of all agriculture up around Huntsville. And living in Sugar Land, at the prison farm there. I was gone from home so much and I just had all I could stand of it, so I left the prison system after nine years, in good graces. I might say that they made the best cotton crop they'd ever made on Eastham prison farm while I was there (chuckling).

TERRELL: When did you get married?

BRISCOE: I got married in 1946. I'd been home just a little over a year, about a year, and I got married. I married Billie Dee Dungan. I met her the night I got out of the army. She had a date with my best friend, Sam McCullough, and we hit it off pretty well!

We have two children, Mason and Dee. And two grandchildren (pause—sotto voce—I'll think of their names in a minute- chuckling). The youngest one is Christopher. He's in the Air Force, about for nine years or so now. And he's out—gonna be out in Nevada pretty soon. But he's been overseas a couple of three times doing different things. Korea—I KNOW he's been to Korea twice, and to Germany once, or twice. But he's settled in now in a steady job in maintaining airfields and so forth. And his older sister, Sheryl, married a boy from Needville and they have one two-year-old son, coming three, and she's expecting again right now.

TERRELL: What about the feed store?

BRISCOE: Okay, after I left the prison system I ran a feed mill for one year for Sugarland Industries. They had built a new feed mill, and I broke it in for them, for a year, not very successfully because we couldn't sell enough feed. At that time there were a lot of dairies in Galveston County but they all moved out north of Houston. And they went to co-op dairy feed and we couldn't compete with them because of the mileage and all, so I lost that job, and then two other guys after me lost their jobs. Then they tore down the feed mill. I worked part-time for Port City Stockyards looking at cattle and separating them and so forth for people, and helping them get them to sale. And then my old uncle says, 'I'll sell you my cattle cheap and lease my land for the taxes and you can go in the cattle business.' And he put me in the cattle business pretty big, with about 500 mother cows.

TERRELL: That IS big.

BRISCOE: And it worked real well for me, except that that was before they had the agricultural tax exemption income tax and it put me to hunting another job to make some money, because at that time, cattle weren't bringing anything. You know, if you just did the cattle alone, without trying to do other things, your income was not enough.

TERRELL: Was that your uncle Mason?

BRISCOE: My uncle, Mason, yes. Now Lawrence Dube was a Purina salesman and I'd known him for a good many years. He lived here in Rosenberg and had this area. One day he said, 'The man in Rosenberg wants out. He's from Needville and wants to go back down there. He probably won't, but he lives in Rosenberg and maybe work down there. They own the Needville Feed Store.' And so we worked out a deal where I could get this feed store here.

The property was for sale. Dr. Banker was on one side with a common wall. The feed store was next door to where we are now. And he wanted to get that feed store so where he'd have that common wall and we got together and we bought the property. And he let me rent that store for nothing for two years to get started. And then it was \$50 a month after that, for six years

TERRELL: Back then, THAT was a lot of money! Does your daughter work here?

BRISCOE: That was her in there, Dee. And Mason was out front. Both children work here.

TERRELL: Well, you mentioned that you were going to take me on a drive, in the country.

BRISCOE: Okay.

TERRELL: I think that's going to be fun. And I'm ready to hear about that too!

BRISCOE: (sotto voce) You want to hear about that. I went to Foster Community School for six year, first six grades, and then started going to Richmond, because the road to Richmond had some gravel on some of it. And the road to Rosenberg was all mud, even though Rosenberg was several miles closer. They formed several communities to go into school districts - to take us to Richmond. They did the same thing with Fulshear and also Simonton. And we all headed toward Richmond School.

TERRELL: When you were young in the Foster community, did you just stay in the country or did you go visit relatives, and what did you do for your pastime?

BRISCOE: Okay, during different seasons, we did different things. But the big thing was screwworms in cattle. My uncle had a lot of land out toward Fulshear and Katy, had cattle, and the cattle in the bottom would have their calves earlier and we could avoid screwworms with them to a certain extent. But on the prairie that calves came later, nearly all had screwworms. And that was a weekend job. We'd start out while it was still dark in the morning, and go on horseback; nobody had trailers to haul them around like they do now. So we'd go horseback across about four miles before we got to the pastures. Then push the cows together and doctor every calf, whether they had screwworms or not. Put some medicine on them to repel the fly that laid the eggs for the screwworms.

TERRELL: How old were you when you started helping with this?

BRISCOE: Haa Haa Ha (laughing) Not very old! I would think six or seven.

TERRELL: That's pretty good.

BRISCOE: I've got a picture somewhere and I couldn't find it last night. I didn't look very long. My uncle bought some Hereford cattle from a guy out by Pleak. Nobody had trucks or anything, so we drove 'em. We got up before daylight and got out there—actually we went in a car and some of the help led the horses there. And we got the Hereford cattle, and we got up to the railroad down here in the town, just on the end of town, and had them there at noon. And the dang train came by and blew his whistle and scattered them!

TERRELL: Oh no!

BRISCOE: (laughing) Not real bad, 'cause Herefords are pretty gentle, but anyway it did scatter 'em just while we were eating lunch! We had to get them back together and then we brought them across the river, here. The bridge was for one-way traffic then. So we had to stop the traffic on one end, push the cattle on the bridge and push them on across. We got twenty of them on there or so the first time, and my uncle and I got behind them, and pushed them on off. And the others followed pretty well. Wasn't any big deal.

TERRELL: Well, we're driving (in the car) now. Tell me where we're going first.

BRISCOE: Okay. The land on this side was part of the Briscoe land grant.

This is FM 723 going toward Fulshear. It included 1300 acres. The first section over there belongs to one of my nephews. When we divided it up, my daddy ended up with all of it except some that the heirs of the old maid aunt got. But my daddy had ten acres here. When my aunt died, in the '50s, this land was sold. This land was given to her, and she and some of the sisters sold their portions of it. So this is not Briscoe land any more.

TERRELL: What about where Foster High School is? Was that Briscoe land?

BRISCOE: Yeah, across the road from Foster High School. This entrance here used to go to the river but when they divided it one brother wanted the land on the river and so we ended up with the best pastureland here on this side. But there's two hundred acres back down that drive.

Some of it was sold because of the taxes on the inheritance. When you get it out of the agricultural exemption, you're in trouble. Now, THIS belongs to some of my kinfolk. It did belong to Aunt Georgie, who married Dolph Briscoe, who's the largest landowner in Texas now.

TERRELL: Oh!

BRISCOE: His son, who's my age, a little older. We start here, up at this road. And the land from this road, Beadle Drive, which went to Sugarland Industries back to FM 359, belonged in the family.

TERRELL: What about Briscoe Manor? Did your family build that?

BRISCOE: One of my nephews, Chip, did that.

TERRELL: Okay, and that road back there, was named?

BRISCOE: Beadle Drive. All the way to FM 359. On the corner back that way to the creek. It goes to the creek and then further on.

TERRELL: It's VERY nice [referring to Briscoe Manor]

BRISCOE: It is nice and useful. They've been making money renting it out for events.

TERRELL: You can't beat that!

BRISCOE: I am going to take you up to that house, the Old House.

TERRELL: That's where you grew up? Oh, I'd like to see that! We're driving down from FM 359.

BRISCOE: This was part of the estate, but it's all been sold now. My brother, Andy, inherited it because he lived on that side.

TERRELL: How often do you go into the feed store now?

BRISCOE: I generally go around noon or pretty close. And I go to the post office, and (sound of turn signal), mailbox and so forth.

TERRELL: Did you have neighbors anywhere close by?

BRISCOE: Well, what is close by? A quarter of a mile? There were some black people that lived across on the other side of the road from us. They were good people. Been there a long time. And then back toward this side -- this road was not here when I was growing up. There was no road there. We lived there about twenty-five years. Next door to Uncle Mason.

We went to church in Rosenberg when we were kids. My grandmother lived in the same block as the Methodist church in Rosenberg and we went there. And when we started going to school in Richmond, we transferred to the Richmond Methodist Church.

TERRELL: And that's where you still are?

BRISCOE: That's where I still am. I've been there all the time except for one year that I worked for Sugarland Industries – it was pretty much—you come to town, you belong to them.

TERRELL: I didn't realize it included church too.

BRISCOE: Well, it didn't really, but you felt more at home there.

TERRELL: So you were on the Board when they restored this Foster Community?

BRISCOE: When they started the restoration. My sister and I were both on it – about five or six years ago now. And we've come a long ways.

TERRELL: Well, it's a wonderful restoration. And the school you attended was identical to this school?

BRISCOE: Well, the first three years I went to one school an old school. The last three years I went to a school identical to this which was across the road and down about three-quarters of a mile.

TERRELL: Well, it's not exactly like what they have today. (both laugh)

BRISCOE: It's a little different! It's a little different!

TERRELL: It's wonderful. GREAT restoration! Thank you. We're going in to see what you call the Old Home. Is that where you were born?

BRISCOE: Yes. I've got a nephew that lives here, Frank (Chip). He goes all over the United States, Europe, and Mexico, working on old buildings.

TERRELL: Well, has Chip changed this house in any way, since he got it?

BRISCOE: Oh, he's trying to restore it to a certain extent, but not really making any major changes.

TERRELL: Are all the Briscoes buried in this family cemetery?

BRISCOE: No, not all. My grandparents would go back to Mississippi where they were from—and they got pneumonia and died on the train. And they were buried we don't know where. All of my generation and my daddy's generation are buried there.

TERRELL: And what year was this home built?

BRISCOE: Oh 1899, or 8. One.

TERRELL: You mentioned that when you were little, the teacher would come and stay here sometimes. In your upstairs bedroom?

BRISCOE: Quite often. Some of them stayed all week. In the wintertime when the weather was bad, the days were shorter. The teachers would stay here.

BRISCOE: You just had a one-teacher school. They taught everybody but they stayed here a lot of times because they had more room in this house.

TERRELL: And you said that you remembered your mother used to let you play football in the hall, when the weather was bad.

BRISCOE: Well, that's when we were, you know, four or five or six years old.

TERRELL: Still, a house full of boys— (chuckles)

BRISCOE: Four boys. We took turns using the different twins, and we always got beat. Just about.

TERRELL: That's great. Can you think of anything else we need to cover, or haven't covered? Or any funny stories?

BRISCOE: (pause) Funny stories—those Hereford cattle that we bought and drove and put 'em up, and we discovered that they had Bangs disease. Bangs disease causes abortions, and so he decided he would sell them all. And we drove them—got them up here and drove them to the railroad trest—had cattle pens on the railroad, down by Clodine. And, we drove them down there and the funny thing about it, everything was real wet, and hot. Oh, it was the middle of the summer hot and my older brother, Andy, was riding a paint filly that Uncle Dolph had sent us for to ride. And she went in that pond to run the cattle out, and laid down with him. (laughing)

TERRELL: And aren't you glad it wasn't you?!

BRISCOE: YES!

TERRELL: Okay, you just said that the land across from Foster High School on, just past FM 723 used to be in cotton. And it was all—

BRISCOE: Hand picked.

TERRELL: And who hand picked it?

BRISCOE: Oh, I hauled it to the gin. We had a lot of it to haul to the gin. I didn't haul it all, but I hauled a lot of it. 'Cause if they hauled it, they had to pick their mules and their wagon and everything, and it was an all day trip.

TERRELL: And how old were you when you did that?

BRISCOE: Uh, twelve, thirteen.

TERRELL: And you were driving?

BRISCOE: Yes. I got my driver's license when I was thirteen.

TERRELL: And who were the cotton pickers? Did you ever pick cotton?

BRISCOE: You know, just a little bit around the buildings or something. Not seriously, no.

TERRELL: It's hard work.

BRISCOE: They picked the cotton, their families picked cotton, all their kids picked cotton. I waited for them sometimes but didn't really seriously pick cotton.

TERRELL: You went to go swim where?

BRISCOE: Just across Westheimer. There were two different pools there we went to a lot. Poormans and can't remember the other family's name. But they were just places we'd go and swim. They were rice farmers but they had these pools by their wells.

TERRELL: And what about the river? You didn't swim in the river?

BRISCOE: I don't ever remember swimming in the river. My brother Bill, did. I don't know that he went swimming, but they used to frog in the river a lot. But that was after he was grown. You know, twenty-odd years old. Not as kids.

TERRELL: You said you rode horses down to the river to fish.

BRISCOE: Yeah, about a five-mile ride.

TERRELL: Did you catch fish?

BRISCOE: Sometimes. Not much (laughs).

TERRELL: Has it always been muddy?

BRISCOE: Ninety percent of the time.

TERRELL: Well, was it deep enough for boats?

BRISCOE: Boats stopped behind Richmond. What they call the rocks. By the Richmond State School. Boats used to go up that far.

TERRELL: Supply boats?

BRISCOE: Any kind of boat.

TERRELL: Did they have a regular dock there?

BRISCOE: Not in my time, no.

TERRELL: Well, this concludes the interview with Mason Briscoe, and it's been very enlightening and wonderful. Thank you so much.

BRISCOE: You're really welcome.

Interview ends.