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Mrs. Erlich
(neighbor)



Mrs. Rachuig
(mother)

HUMBLE CAMP NOTES

By Mayme Rachuig Bass Hause

For the Fort Bend County Historical Commission oral History Project

My family moved to Sugar Land in about 1932 from the Fairfield Humble Camp. Our cottage at the Oil Field about 6 miles southeast of the town of Sugar Land, had not been completed for the Humble Pipe Line Division. Already working at the Pump Station was part of Dad's staff; Frank Tatum and the Flynn family were living in nearby Stafford until housing was made available for them. Mostly the employees of Gulf Oil were the residents that were already living there in around 1929-30. In fact, there were about 20 or so families living there in 1930. Some of the families were Manning, Neal, Byrd, DeBlanc, Hayes, Wappler, Chaney, Pruitt, Taylor, Woods, Stevens, and Vaness.

The Oil Field Camp was a small community that included cottages, oil company offices, a Sugarland Industries general store, barber shop, a boarding house, a home canning facility, a recreation hall, a well equipped playground, beside the Humble Pump Station and the Oil Refinery. And I must not forget the swimming pool. The camp was well lit at night with gas lamps that lined each row of houses. There were 3 rows of about 10 houses on each one. The open areas of the camp were well kept by a maintenance man, who was kept busy in the summer time mowing with a hand pushed mower. We had a large fish pond full of gold fish to watch, surrounded by Nopal cactus to keep us from climbing all around this area when playing 'hide and seek". The cacti grew on a small mound surrounded by tall Cedar trees. My sister and I loved to watch the fish when we were small, but later the pond became a hazard, and was filled in.

The "Rec Hall" was the favorite place of the families to gather and play card games and dominoes on Saturday nights. During the spring and fall times of the year, the Ladies Garden Club had a Flower Show. Ladies from the surrounding communities entered also. Judges from other places would come and judge the entries, which was very competitive among the towns. Then later on when we were teenagers, this became the place for our friends from Sugar Land, Missouri City and Stafford to come and have dances and parties. At that time, the schools did not open up the gyms for the teenagers. Everyone loved to come out to the well-chaperoned parties during those years. The girls at times would have slumber parties, and stay up most of the night chatting about the news of the week.

One time a very good friend of ours was there at a slumber party, and we were all dressed in our nighttime attire. We ventured out to the playground that had an 8 or 9-foot tall merry-go-round that had been built of sturdy pipe by the men of the work gang. We spent many an hour on it, swinging on it with our legs dangling down or even bent over so we could push with our legs when they touched the ground to make another round. Well, this time, our friend's nightie got caught and she was pulled up to the top, and was dangling there. Pushing hard to get her down, we had a big laugh at her experience. After all the excitement, she joined in the laughter. Many times, we would be caught up on the top waiting for someone to come and help push us down to the ground. Screaming at the top of our lungs to get someone's attention.

The way the plat of the camp was laid out, it made for a great place to ride our bicycles and roller skate. The camp had sidewalks along the front of the houses on each row and two that connected the first and second rows. Many a bicycle and roller skate made the rounds of these walkways. It was a safe place for us to play. Also along one side of the superintendent's house was a long pipe about 40 feet long, and about 6 inches in width, that was fun to do somersaults on and other maneuvers when friends gathered there. This all along with plenty of playground equipment: Ferris wheel, slides, seesaws, and swings. There was nothing that was not provided for us to have plenty of safe places to spend the hours of playtime.

The swimming hole! It was only about 3 feet deep and one end was about a foot deep for the toddlers, so when springtime came, we would haul brushes, buckets and all of our mother's bleach bottles to clean it out after the long winter's toll on it. The bottom was very rough as well as the sides, and there were many blisters on toes and fingers from our endeavors. This was the time before inner tubes, so we used our mother's washtubs to float around in. This was the gathering place when we had company out to visit, and our friends would also come to spend time with us.

When we were preschoolers, Dad built was a large sandbox, and this became the gathering place for our friends to play house, taking out the dolls and doll furniture from inside our houses and setting up our own little house. At times, our friend next door would build a little tent-like theater of two sheets pinned over the clothesline in the backyard and give plays like the 'Lil Rascals, even charging a penny or two, until his mother found out and made him quit.

This was way back when we had wringer washing machines, and wash tubs, no electric clothes washers or dryers. No TV, computer, just radios. We hung clothes on the long line across the back yard. We invented our own plays and stories. There was a big tree in our neighbor's yard, and in the summers of our teenage years, we would throw a blanket or two, depending the number of friends around, and play all kind of card games. Battle, Pitch and Spades to name a few. No one stayed in the house, but just long enough to eat and hurry back outside to continue our card games.

About 1940's, the Humble Co. decided to do some additions to the cottages of the employees, and added on a room or remodeled the kitchens, but until then it was 2 bedrooms, kitchen, living room and bath. Some had a screened in porch added. Even later, during World War II, our father was able to get a telephone because he was a supervisor and needed it for work. We would carry messages to our neighbor's from their family and friends, or they could come over and use the phone. Dad allotted the younger ones about 3 minutes to say what we needed to say and get off. No hanging on for hours, that is for certain. It was really a company phone for him to use.

There were many of boys, who lived out in the camp, that served their country proudly in World War II. We lost only one boy from our community, our neighbor's son, whose father was staff member for Dad. He had enlisted in the navy only 6 months earlier, and then was lost at sea. When the government called his family of his death, no one was at our house except my sister, who had to take the message and relay it to our friends. It was a not an easy task for a pre-teen to face his family with this heart breaking news. All the Camp grieved over his loss as if he were their son too.

The Camp was a very close community, and folks took care of one another's children, and corrected them if the children misbehaved. During World War II, gas was rationed, but the employees of oil companies had unlimited rations. There was one family who did not have children. They gave us tickets to buy gas to go into town to visit with our friends. The boy next door, whose older brother was in the Navy, would come and gather a lot of us in his parent's car, and we would push the car out the driveway into the street, before we would start it, so his parents would not hear us, or so we thought. But we found out later that his Dad always knew when we did this, and allowed us our little secret jaunts into Sugar Land. He surly heard us giggle the whole way out to the street, and I am sure, that gave us away. He was gentle man, and allowed these little episodes of ours. We never did anything that was very serious, just good ole fun.

Never do I remember any of the teenagers having a wreck during my growing up years. Most all of the kids could drive a car by the time they were 12, and including me. When I was younger, Mother would let me sit in her lap and steer the car, while she would use the pedals. I was probably about 10 when I was allowed to drive lunch to Dad at the pump station about a mile down the road. What a privilege, and the feeling of being so grown up.

One Halloween, the older teenage boys put an outhouse up on top of the Gulf Office building. Everyone had a good laugh the next day when the boys had to struggle to get it down. Another time, they managed to get a cotton wagon up on the top. And once again, the boys had to get it down by themselves. This was their punishment. No adult help. The Superintendent was a good guy, and knew that 'kids would be kids'. He never turned us down to have a party or dance, if the rec center had not been booked. Another time, these same teenagers, put a rope under the arms of one of the older boys, and pulled him up in a tree and let him dangle there until his mother came out and gave them all a tongue lashing. Years later when we met our friends, we'd say, "Do you remember when the boys hung Jack up in the tree?" That was excitement that lasted for months.

There was a row of Green Gage Plums along the backside of the rec hall, and in the springtime, while they were still small and hard as rocks, we would eat them all before anyone could gather them for jelly. The best way to eat them was to sprinkle salt on them, and cherish this tasty treat. Perhaps a few tummy aches occurred from this feast. The folks always wondered why those trees never had any plums on them.

When the front yards of the houses were all lit up at night with the gaslights, the younger ones were able to stay out after dark and play hide and seek or tag. Most summer nights were filled with the games until the school year began. When we were older, and teenagers, most of us would gather at what we called the 'First Bridge', which was one of two bridges over small sloughs, and about a fourth of a mile from the camp, where we could talk in the privacy that all teenagers crave. It was quite a gathering spot. In our younger years, crawfishing was the thing to do in the springtime at the First Bridge. After catching the crawfish then taking them home in a bucket of water Mother would salt and pepper, then roll them in cornmeal, and deep-fry them. This was always looked forward too in the spring, crawfishing with bacon tied to a string, and a big nail for a sinker. Sometimes picking them up by the back of the head, if brave enough to chance getting pinched by the big claws. Louisiana with their crawfish boils didn't have a thing on us in the springtime.

Our friends the Ehrlich's lived in the boarding house at the camp. Their father managed the Sugarland Industries store, but when we were about 10, they closed the store, and the family moved to Houston. We really missed our friends, and the family came back often or we would visit them in Houston. In their front yard were Chinaberry trees, and what Chinaberry fights there were! All chimed in this fun, young and older friends.

On the edge of the perimeter of the Camp, Sugarland Industries had fields of cotton and corn for miles up to Highway 6. In the summertime, when we were younger, all of us would go and pick cotton and see who could pick the most. The sacks never seemed to fill up, and no more than about 50 cents would be earned. Goodness, it was hot and sweaty, and this pastime soon was forgotten for the rest of the summer.

In front of our house, was an area called the turnaround, where an area was large enough for the school bus to pull off the road and park so all of the school children could go to school in Sugar Land. The driver was usually there about 20 minutes every morning. My, how the driver had the patience for we would have songfests and see which side of the bus could sing the loudest. He was the epitome of Job. So patient with us, as never anyone was put off the bus, and privileges taken away. This went on for the 12 years we attended school in Sugar Land. Some of our friends went to Missouri City to school, and there was sort of a rivalry over school sports, but just a friendly one. These students did not have a bus to pick them up, and were taken by different parents to school, until one of the older teenagers could get their driver's license.

In World War II, they converted the canning facility into an observation post to watch for enemy planes. All had to learn to recognize the silhouettes of all the known US planes flown in the war. Even the children took their turn in 'observing', as it was called. Each observer had about a 3-hour allotment. We never saw an enemy plane, but the government sent a letter of commendation to The Camp for our participation. Other events in wartime were rolling bandages, knitting socks, sweaters and scarfs for the troops. Mrs. Ruth Lalley over in De Walt was head of the Red Cross in our area, and Mother took us once a week to participate in "Rollin Bandages", usually children from Missouri City or Stafford would be there, and it was a fun time for us to visit with our friends. Miz Ruth Dew Lalley and Miz Jessie Dew were sisters that lived in the beautiful old Dew Plantation home. Huge pecan trees surrounded it and it was always so cool and pleasant out on the screened in veranda that surrounded the front and sides of the house.

DeWalt was where we could go and buy a few groceries and gas up the car when my parents did not want to drive into Sugar Land. Also, we had friends that lived in DeWalt, and I remember exactly that late Sunday afternoon in December 1941, when the news came over the radio about the Japanese bombing Pearl Barbour. This put a damper on our hide and seek game.

Phil Harris, a singer of the era, would come to Houston and perform in nightclubs. Before the war, he wrote a little song called "Do Wa Diddy", which was written about De Walt. Everyone sang that song for years, as I remember. Most folks did not even realize know it was written about De Walt.

When we were growing up, our best friend's father had a cow, and delivered fresh milk every evening to those in the camp that ordered a quart. In fact, several of the men had cattle and milk cows. Our friend's mother made clabber and cottage cheese, which was for sale. She baked the best cookies called "Rocks", and our mouths would water just waiting for them to come out of the oven. UMMMMMMMMMMMMM. So good, my mouth waters now.

The Camp families had gardens and made good use of the canning kitchen. Each family would sign up in the spring for their time to can fresh vegetables. Also, there was a vendor named Tony that came out from Sugar Land once or twice a week, and bring out fresh vegetables and fruit for the ones that were not grown in the gardens. Tony would park in the turnaround in front of our house, and ring the bell on his truck. Out came the mothers to buy their supply until he returned again.

The men built a croquet field, and kept it up perfectly, in fact, the children were not allowed to play on it, since the men took this game very seriously. Scores were kept, and even tournaments were held. Also, there was a place to pitch washers and horseshoes. This was a favorite pastime for the men, and most of the time the wives were out to watch also. The little community was really a great place to bring up a family. There was very little traffic on our road except during the work days when the tanker trucks would come to get the gasoline at the refinery. On weekends it was very quite. Also around the 4 of July the Gulf and Humble Companies would have this large barbecue and employees and friends from all around the area would come for the feast. The men dug a deep pit and would cook the beef and goats very slow over the coals until tender juicy. The ladies served the potato salad, slaw and beans for side dishes. This event was always looked forward too, as the wooded area across the levee was cool and wonderful spot for such a yearly event.

The Humble and Gulf Cos. maintained the cottages, and charged only for the water that each household used. Electricity and gas was provided to the families as well but was not a charge for them. Everyone had to keep up their own yards but the painting and the companies paid for repairs to the home. All the families had beautiful flowers, and some had rose gardens too. Everything was so neat and clean all about the camp. Kids did not trash the area; it was just something we did not do. So it is no wonder that folks loved to come and visit and participate in our activities in the Camp. Not long after Dad was transferred to La Grange, the camp seemed to go in another direction, and it was closed down, and some of the houses were bought by folks in Stafford and moved there to Stafford.

I am so saddened that the times are not like those of yesteryear; that children were safe at play and had no fear of the things that happen today. I feel so blest to have had this close relationship with each and every family with their children in the years of 1930 to 1950.