

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewees: **Melba Marguerite Votaw Gupton**

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Interviewer: Bill Duggan

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

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11 Pages



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*Transcript*

DUGGAN: Full name of Miss Gupton is Melba Marguerite Votaw Gupton. Lets start with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

GUPTON: I was born in Phoenix, Arizona, 1929.

DUGGAN: Was that in a hospital or...

GUPTON: Yes it was Good Samaritan Hospital.

DUGGAN: What brought your family to this area, to Fort Bend County?

GUPTON: We moved to Texas from Arizona when I was in first grade. My family originally was from near around this part of Texas and then when my husband was in veterinary school at A&M he was looking for a place to go. He did an internship at the Fort Bend Veterinary Clinic in Rosenberg and he thought that this was a really up and coming area so he wanted to set up a practice here.

DUGGAN: Your family moved back here when you were in first grade?

GUPTON: Yes, back to Texas from Arizona.

DUGGAN: What year would that have been?

GUPTON: Well I was born in twenty-nine and I was... well I would have been six when I we moved, I think so 1935, I guess.

DUGGAN: What was this area like then do you recall?

GUPTON: Wasn't much, it was really small, the Richmond main street, Morton Street in Richmond was much like it is now, although there were little department stores and a Doctor Nichols office. That building that is right on the corner from here was a Levy and Daily Dry Good Store. They had everything, they had groceries, they said 'if we don't got it they don't make it.' It was about the truth (chuckling). The courthouse was much like it is now, well without any addition to the back. The other courthouse buildings were not here then, not any of them just the big courthouse, the old one.

DUGGAN: So Morton Street was the main street for everything.

GUPTON: Yes, for everything, seemed to me it was. Because I don't recall any grocery stores being anywhere else. The post office was on the corner there, where Sandy McGee's is now. There were a number of little grocery stores, Josephs, a Red and White and Reinke's, a small grocery right on Morton Street. And there was a little store called the Economy store, what we used to call a dime store. One department store at least. I think every building probably had something in it at the time.

DUGGAN: Interesting, what type of work did your father do when you moved back to Texas?

GUPTON: I didn't move to Fort Bend County until I was in college. I married my husband in his last year of A&M.

DUGGAN: In 1935 when you came to Texas, what kind of work did your father do?

GUPTON: He farmed and he was also a carpenter, so he did both.

DUGGAN: What about your mother?

GUPTON: She had been a schoolteacher, during the war she taught, but soon as the war was over, her certification had run out. But during the war they were desperate for teachers and so she taught then without any problems.

DUGGAN: Did you help with the chores and things around the house?

GUPTON: I did, yes. I didn't do any fieldwork.

DUGGAN: You lived out on the farm?

GUPTON: For awhile, we did yes. Then we moved into Brazoria and lived there and just had a garden was all (chuckles). My father was a carpenter then and later in life both my parents worked in the courthouse in Angleton. My father was a District Court bailiff and my mother worked in the Tax Department.

DUGGAN: In Angleton?

GUPTON: In Angleton, that was in the later years of their lives.

DUGGAN: So you grew up on the farm in Brazoria County and moved to the town of Brazoria?

GUPTON: Yes, that's right. One of the farms we lived on was down on the Bernard River, just a few miles from the Gulf.

DUGGAN: Do you remember any of the neighbors there when you were living on the farm?

GUPTON: There was a Masterson, I've forgotten his first name but he was kin to the Masterson's in Houston. He was from Houston. There was a Pool Ranch on the other side of us, a big ranch. The farm we lived on was called the Cox-Aubin place, named for its owners, who were relatives of my father.

DUGGAN: Were you closer then to Richmond or to...

GUPTON: In those days we were south of Brazoria, between Brazoria and the Gulf. We moved to town in Brazoria after awhile and my parents quit farming. After my husband got out of veterinary school the stores in Rosenberg didn't seem to have much to draw me over there. They had some little dress shops and things in Rosenberg that did have more than just the little department store that we had here in Richmond.

DUGGAN: So you and your husband then moved here in what year?

GUPTON: We moved here in June of 1949.

DUGGAN: So the descriptions you gave me earlier of Morton Street was from...

GUPTON: From '49. yes. I remember coming to Richmond, my grandparents lived out close to the George Ranch. It wasn't George Ranch; it was property that a hunting club owned out on Smithers Lake. I remember coming here once to visit my grandparents just before Christmas to get to see Santa Claus. One of the stores had Santa Claus! I was 6 or 7 years old at the time. My parents never lived in Fort Bend County. When I was a child we came here to visit my grandparents.

DUGGAN: Your grandparents lived near the George Ranch? What were their names?

GUPTON: John Harley Clegg and Mary Ivy Clegg. They lived right on that lake called Smithers Lake, right close to where that big electric plant is now.

My Grandfather lived there twice, he worked for the man that owned that place, Mr. Rosen. He was a rice farmer the first time he was there and he worked for Mr. Rosen. The second time he was there the land had been sold to a group here in town that made a fishing and hunting club out of it. So he was sort of caretaker for that club.

DUGGAN: When you moved here with your husband in 1949, what did you and your family do for entertainment?

GUPTON: Hummm, there was a zoo in Houston and when our kids got a little older we would take them to the zoo sometimes. There was a movie theater both in Richmond and in Rosenberg in those days. They had children's programs on Saturday afternoons my kids really enjoyed that. My husband's father had a ranch out of West Columbia and we would go down there and sometimes we would fish and when they got older they hunted on that family ranch and on some hill country ranches also. As the children got older, they went to Scouts and played baseball. Occasionally we would spend Sunday afternoons at the Galveston beach plus go to Gaidos to eat.

But back in the beginning there was not a whole lot to do. We got our first television, oh, during the first ten years that we lived here, I don't remember exactly when, but it was an old black and white one with a big old cabinet (chuckling). There were a few children's programs, not much. The children did watch just a few things that were especially for them. We always had lots of animals at our house since my husband was a veterinarian. (laughing).

DUGGAN: Where did you go to church?

GUPTON: Right here where we are at this moment, St. John's United Methodist Church. When we moved here we joined immediately and the people were so outgoing and welcoming and kind. I was just amazed at how friendly this church was.

DUGGAN: How did you meet your husband?

GUPTON: During the war, he was stationed at Corpus Christi, that's that picture down there next to the bottom on the left. He had a good friend in the little town that I lived in Brazoria is right close to West Columbia about eight miles away. He had a friend that lived in Brazoria, a girl. They were just good friends and he would come home a lot of times on a weekend when he was stationed at the Corpus Christi Naval air base. He would bring one of his sailor friends and she would go out with the sailor and she would get some of her friends to go with him. She asked me one weekend to come and that's where I met him. I remember that he was a senior when I was a freshman in high school but he didn't pay any attention to me (laughing). He didn't remember me. But that's how it all started, right at the end of World War II.

This picture, of him... that's a crash crew... they had a modified PT boat that they called their crash boat. He was the medic on the boat and the other three fellas were divers. Unfortunately they had a number of crashes of Navy fliers training at Corpus Christi Naval Air Base. Those fellas would turn and they would crash in the Gulf. John's boat would go out and hope to find survivors, but they never did. The fliers were always deceased, but he was there in case they did find somebody alive. It was not a good place to crash. It was a sad thing, but somebody needed to do it. He never got sent overseas. From there he went to Nashville, Tennessee.

In Nashville they asked, 'Who can type?' and he raised his hand. He said that was such a mistake, because they closed up that naval base and he was one of the last ones to leave. He had to do a lot of typing and he had to do a lot of inventory, where equipment had to go. Then they sent him to Camp Wallis, which was the Discharge Center in this part of Texas. They discharged the sailors; he said he typed his own discharge! (chuckling).

DUGGAN: He could have typed that up earlier!

GUPTON: Yes, (chuckling) they didn't let him make the choices (laughing).

DUGGAN: Tell me about your schooling, you went to school in Brazoria?

GUPTON: I started in Arizona in the fall of then first grade. During the Christmas holidays we moved back to Texas and we bought a little farm out of Sweeney and so I went to Sweeney schools for awhile, then we moved down south of Brazoria on the Bernard River next to the Pool Ranch. We lived there a year or two without any schools. The roads were so muddy and bad you couldn't get to school so my mother just taught me at home. The local school would give her books and she would teach me at home and then the next year I guess, she just decided that wasn't really good enough so when school was in we rented an apartment in Brazoria. She and my little brother and I would stay there during the week and then we would go back down on the river on weekends. Then finally my parents built a house in Brazoria, and quit farming. My father was a carpenter and he built houses. Back in those days they were just small wooden houses.

During the war he had a friend who got him a job in Panama driving a drilling machine... they were drilling dynamite holes to blast out an area to put a new set of locks in the Panama Canal. He stayed in Panama for a year doing that then came back. I went to school in Brazoria, when we moved into Brazoria.

The same school I had been going to in the winters for two years. I went from Brazoria Elementary School... I was bussed to West Columbia because we were part of a consolidated district, but Brazoria didn't have any high school or junior high, so we just went from elementary into high school at West Columbia. When I graduated from West Columbia I went to University of Texas for a couple of years. Then I got married and we were one year at A&M, my husband had one year left. We moved to A&M and during the Christmas holidays that year we started building the Richmond Animal Hospital. We would come back here every weekend and check on what the progress was on the building. When we got out of school in June, I think it was finished, so we opened up right after we moved here. He'd gotten the drugs and supplies he needed.

I had three boys. When my youngest child got in junior high, I went back to school, I started at Wharton County Junior College and I went there for one semester and then I transferred to University of Houston and I got a degree in Elementary Education from the University of Houston. Then I started teaching at Lamar. My first school was Jane Long in Rosenberg then I went to Jackson to teach for three years. While I was at Jane Long I started back to school to get a Masters degree in guidance and counseling. I got that, so then I wasn't able to get a job here, but I got a job in Katy as a counselor. I worked as a counselor in Katy for three years and then I transferred to Alief Independent School District and was a counselor there for, I think, thirteen years.

DUGGAN: Tell us about your mother and father.

GUPTON: My mother was Melba May Clegg she married Palmer Brooks Votaw, my father. In later years my father died and my mother married a man named Clinton Cunningham.

DUGGAN: Siblings?

GUPTON: I have a brother his name is William Travis Votaw. My father was a great history buff and he wanted to name him after William Barrett Travis, whom he admired greatly.

DUGGAN: I have note here to ask about the Aggie Ring dance.

GUPTON: Oh yes, that stack [Indicating photos she brought] has a picture of the Aggie Ring Dance that A&M used to have. They still have it. Every year, it is a huge ring covered with gold foil and you walk through it together as a couple if that's the way you came to the dance. You walk through it and they take your picture and celebrate the time of year when the seniors all buy their rings. So they celebrate it with a dance. That was a picture of us.



DUGGAN: A great memory. Tell us something about your children.

GUPTON: We have three sons. Thomas Wayne Gupton was born September 19, 1949. He is in business as a Sprinkler and Landscape contractor. Most of his time was spent in south and central Texas. He graduated from Texas A & M University in 1972.

John Samuel Gupton was born September 30, 1951. He graduated from Sam Houston State University in 1973.

Ronald Alan Gupton was born on May 27, 1954. He graduated from Texas A & M University in 1976. Most of his work has been Commercial and Multi Family Construction.

DUGGAN: As you think about growing up, what is your remembrance of how did the races got along?

GUPTON: I never got in the middle of any kind of racial strife at all. My mother had a woman that used to come help her wash and iron. That was before electric irons. We didn't even have electricity; we were living down on the Bernard River. That was my only contact with a black person, actually we just knew somebody that would come to help my mother. Of course we were very segregated in those days. In West Columbia the Mexican children went to a little separate school.

Most places had separate black schools, I guess. Brazoria had a separate black school; my mother was very concerned, she said the black children didn't have the supplies and the things that they needed and the school was not well kept. Now I am sure that the people that were on the school boards would not have appreciated her saying that she felt like the children were not getting what they should get.

When I moved here I had some black women that worked for me at different times. I don't remember having any trouble or anything. I do remember when these schools integrated the woman that worked for me ask me what she should do. You could choose which school you wanted to go to, continue in the black school or go to the white schools as they slowly eased into the desegregated school district. I told her that I thought she ought to let the child go to the white school because I knew what it was and I feared that the black school was more like what it was when I was growing up in Brazoria and my mother said it was inadequate. So anyway she did put her child in the white elementary and the child did all right.

DUGGAN: Good. Do you have any vivid memories about the old days here in Richmond?

GUPTON: I thought the people in this church were so outgoing and so friendly they just welcomed us with open arms and were just really really kind and I think the church is still like that.

DUGGAN: Just for the record here, this is the Saint Johns United Methodist Church.

GUPTON: Right...

DUGGAN: Is there anything you can think of you'd like to share that I haven't asked about?

GUPTON: I guess those pictures up there in that write up. That was when we first came. That child in the picture is our oldest son, Thomas. He was the only one we had at the time. The newspapers used to do a lot of human-interest writing. They don't do that much anymore. That other picture there is stories about animals. Down at the bottom is the present owner of the Richmond Animal Hospital, Doctor Mandola and his family, he's got three children and that's his wife down there on the left. My husband sold that hospital to Dr. Mandola. It was either 1982 or 1983. He's had it ever since, he has had it a long time now.

When my husband sold his practice to Doctor Mandola, my husband started ranching full time. He ranched about ten years or more. This picture on the bottom right is where my husband is holding the cows jaw open showing its teeth. The teeth across the front have been capped. A lot of times cattle will chew grass and the grass has sand in it and it will grind their teeth down. So they tried for a few years to see if the capping would work, used steel caps, it worked for a while, but evidently the caps didn't stay on, finally they just quit doing it. That's what that picture is, its kind of a funny looking picture because he's holding that cows mouth open.

DUGGAN: Interesting

GUPTON: These pictures up here, this one... two of those calves came from the George Ranch out here.

Mr. George used to set aside some really nice calves and then he would let the F.F.A. boys come and he would interview them before he would let them buy his calves. My husband was so impressed with him because when my husband was just a kid Mr. George talked to him like he was an adult.



DUGGAN: Who is in this picture?

GUPTON: That's my husband when he was in junior high. He lived in West Columbia, but Mr. George would take these kids from other counties and let them buy good calves from him at a reasonable price. I brought that because I thought that was kind of a tie between my husband when he was a kid and this area. That is the same picture with the cow's teeth. That's at the county fair in Rosenberg... the girl's got a rabbit in her hand.

He used to help with the auctions all the time. He would go around to different people and tell them, 'Now I'm working for the Fort Bend County Youth Auction and would you let me buy something for you?' A lot of the business men, rather than having to go to the auction, would just tell him, 'I will pay "X" amount of money per pound our whatever it was.' He would have this long list and it would help the auction, because the more bidders you had the more excitement. He did that for years. This picture is of something he or somebody bought when he was working at the auction.

DUGGAN: Tell us more about your husband; he sounds like quite a man.

GUPTON: His name was John Walter Gupton. He was born in August 1926. He passed away in November 2006. He earned his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Degree from Texas A & M in May 1949. He practiced Veterinary Medicine at the Richmond Animal Hospital for 32 years. He sold the practice to Dr. Joe Mandola in 1982. He then ranched for several years at his father's Ranch in West Columbia (The P.L. Gupton Estate) and at his own Ranch, Cap Rock Falls Ranch in Washington County until he sold his herds and completely retired in 2002.

He had a real zest for life. He loved veterinary medicine and ranching, both. He also enjoyed developing land. He developed two small subdivisions. He also loved to work with local service clubs such as Fort Bend County Fair, Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, and Boy Scouts of America.

He practiced Veterinary Medicine for 32 years during the same time that he was doing some ranching and some land developing. When he began practicing Veterinary Medicine he said his practice was about 80% large animals and when he retired it was about 80% small animals. He loved all of it but seemed to prefer large animals. He was raised in a ranching and dairying family. There is a Veterinary Scholarship set up in his honor at Texas A & M.

On Saturday March 5, 2011, Dr. Gupton's Richmond Animal hospital was given the TVMA Heritage Practice Award which is given to recognize all practices of Veterinary Medicine in Texas that have been in continuous operation 50 years or more. This hospital has been open continuously since June 1949.