

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: Ray Barton

Interview Date: 06/24/2011

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: Riverbend County Club, Sugar Land, Texas

9 Pages



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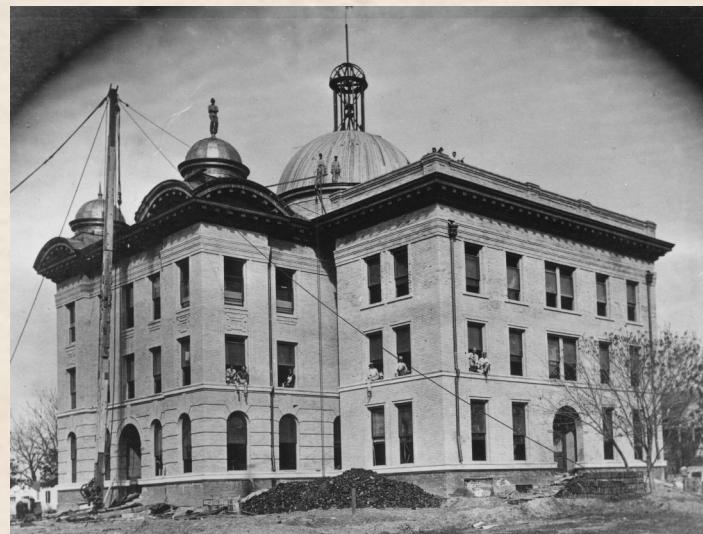
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Transcript

GOODSILL: Mr. Barton is here, attending the Sugar Land High School reunion. So thanks for sitting and answering a few questions for us. The first one is, when and where were you born?

BARTON: February 7, 1939. Marlin, Texas.

GOODSILL: How did your family get to Fort Bend County?

BARTON: My dad went to work for Humble Oil Company and so we moved to Humble Camp, probably—let's see—probably about 1945 or '44.

GOODSILL: Was the Humble Camp pretty much at the intersection of Commonwealth and Palm Royale?

BARTON: Yes, near Oilfield Road.

GOODSILL: What did your dad do for Humble?

BARTON: Well, he was a roustabout and worked in the gas plant.

GOODSILL: And what was it like for your mom when they moved out here and lived at the Humble Camp?

BARTON: Well, that was after, right after the Depression and then World War II, so people didn't have a lot. And to have a nice home and a yard for the kids to play in, and other kids for the kids to play with, that was quite a step up in life for most of the folks my parents age.

GOODSILL: Had your parents moved here from Marlin?

BARTON: No, my dad helped build the Dow Chemical Plant for the war. He got drafted and then he had an accident before he actually was inducted into the service—and after he got out of the hospital, he worked with a construction company, building what's now the Dow Chemical Company. And then after the construction job was over, he went to work for Humble.

GOODSILL: So Humble provided you with a nice home to live in, out at the Camp?

BARTON: Well, pretty nice for those days, yeah. (laughs)

GOODSILL: And how about groceries? What was Camp life was like.

BARTON: Well, everyone had a garden. But they got groceries from the Sugar Land Mercantile, which was next to the old refinery. And by the time I was in high school, about the time I was maybe a freshman in high school, they built the new shopping center, with the grocery store across—on the south side of the tracks. Up until then, everyone shopped in the old Sugar Land Mercantile over on the north side.

GOODSILL: That was pretty far away back then?

BARTON: Well, it was six miles.

GOODSILL: Your family had a car?

BARTON: Yes.

GOODSILL: Who drove, Dad or Mom?

BARTON: Both.

GOODSILL: Both drove. And you were about six when you moved out to the Humble Camp?

BARTON: Let me see—my sister went to first grade in Angleton and then went to second grade in Sugar Land, so I would have been—they didn't have kindergarten in those days—but I would have been in kindergarten when we moved to Humble Camp.

GOODSILL: So where did you go to school?

BARTON: At Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: And how did you get there?

BARTON: By bus. School bus. Good or bad, that ride on the school bus?

BARTON: It was okay. Mr. Womack drove the school bus. He lived in an apartment above the old auditorium. And he was in charge of keeping the grounds and in the summertime, he ran the swimming pool. They had an indoor swimming pool. It was part of the old gymnasium. And he kept all that running. I don't think they really hired any other help. I think he mowed and did all the upkeep on all of it.

GOODSILL: And he drove the bus?

BARTON: And he also drove the bus. And he didn't put up with any nonsense. If boys were acting up, he'd pull over and fan their britches and start up again. (laughs)

GOODSILL: You liked living in the Humble Camp? It was fun for you?

BARTON: It was a great place because there were probably two dozen kids out there, of all ages. But there were probably eight within a year of my age, one side or the other.

GOODSILL: Did they have any recreation areas out there?

BARTON: Well, they had a little swimming pool. It probably wasn't very big. I'd guess it was probably 20 x 30 foot, but it was a good little swimming pool. And then they had a—I guess you would call it just a big room, where people have functions and whatnot. And then we had—they had torn down the old store that they had there, so there was a BIG concrete slab. They put basketball goals up so we had a good basketball court. Except it didn't have a roof, it was as good as what they had at the school. I always played sports.

GOODSILL: And then at what point in your life did you start getting involved with school-activity sports?

BARTON: Probably in the 5th or 6th grade, they started a Pee Wee football team in Sugar Land. That was when Mr. White came to be the superintendent. He really turned Sugar Land around. And we started the Pee Wee football team and we were pretty good. That had what—it was just a game—but they called it the Bellaire Bowl. So when I was in—I guess it must've been the 6th grade-- would have been my last year of Pee Wee football, before I started Junior High football—we played the Bellaire All-Stars, which was several schools from Bellaire in what was the inaugural Bellaire Bowl. And we beat 'em! (laughs)

So for a little dump like Sugar Land to beat—you know, six or eight schools in Bellaire was quite an accomplishment for Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: What did Mr. White have to do with putting together the Pee Wee?

BARTON: Sugar Land was in bad shape when he came. The school was about to lose their accreditation; the kids couldn't go from Sugar Land direct to college. He didn't change anything except attitude. He just got everybody involved.

GOODSILL: And he started when they were young. Pee Wee.

BARTON: Yeah. But for the first year, he was at football practice every day. I guess that was Kenneth's freshman year—was Mr. White's first year.

GOODSILL: And remind me what year you were in? You were still in Pee Wee at that time?

BARTON: Yeah. I played '53 to '56 at Sugar Land. So '53 was my freshman year and that was Kenneth's senior year.

GOODSILL: That must have been exciting times!

BARTON: Yeah. I was—it didn't mean anything to me at the time, but I was the only freshman who made the Varsity. It was incredible, really, because Sugar Land had a JV team and no other school of our size had a JV team. So we would have to play Alvin and Lamar Consolidated for JV games. And they outweighed us fifty pounds a man! We'd just get the stuffin' beat out of us, but at least we got to play! (laughs)

GOODSILL: Why were they so much bigger?

BARTON: They had a lot more kids to choose from. The schools were four or five times the size that Sugar Land was.

GOODSILL: But you were still proud to go out and give it a try.

BARTON: Oh, yeah. By the time we got to high school we could do it (laughs).

GOODSILL: You could compete!

BARTON: Yeah.

GOODSILL: Do you remember going to any of the games that Kenneth was playing in?

BARTON: Oh yeah. I played in all of them when I was a freshman. I played a lot when I was a freshman. I probably went to every game he ever played. Including before I got to playing.

GOODSILL: Did you have a sense at the time how special it was?

BARTON: Yeah, yeah. I don't think Sugar Land had ever won very much, at anything, before Kenneth came along. But it wasn't just the sports. We were just wiping people out. In the UIL contest in the spring, speech and ready-writing and all that stuff—I mean we weren't just going to State, we had kids winning State!

GOODSILL: In every respect, not just sports, but in academics and every other competition.

BARTON: Yes, he just lifted the whole school.

GOODSILL: Kind of like the perfect storm.

BARTON: Exactly right. He was the perfect man for that time, that's for sure.

GOODSILL: Really changed your life in a way, having him be a—

BARTON: We had—you probably met him at some point—David Armstrong—He came along. He was in my class. And the guy was SO smart! You don't even know what a slide rule is, but we used to do Number Sense and Slide Rule. He won State in Number Sense and Slide Rule when he was a freshman. Since he'd already done that the next year, he won State in Speech and Ready Writing. And then the third year, he went back to Number Sense and Slide Rule. Nowadays it wouldn't work, because now they teach to the dumbest part of the class. Back then, they raised everybody.

GOODSILL: Kind of gives me chills to hear about it. Very inspiring. And there were some remarkable students and athletes that were affected by Mr. White's leadership?

BARTON: Oh yeah, for sure.

GOODSILL: You were one of them, I think.

BARTON: I was a so-called 'dumb jock' but I placed 10th at State in Number Sense.

GOODSILL: Really! Good for you!!

BARTON: (laughs)

GOODSILL: Did you surprise yourself?

BARTON: No, I knew I—

GOODSILL: You knew you were good at it! What kind of career did you choose?

BARTON: I was in the drilling business with Texaco.

GOODSILL: Kind of followed your dad's lead, a little bit?

BARTON: Well, just happenstance. And I worked overseas for years. I was in the oil business for 42 years. I was a mud engineer and then a drilling supervisor, drilling foreman, and in later years I was a so-called drilling manager. I helped drill wells in 42 countries. I traveled all over.

GOODSILL: Wow. Did you take your family with you?

BARTON: For a long time we did. We lived in England and Norway, Scotland and Italy. And then in 1980, Congress changed the tax rules so you couldn't—companies and individuals—take deductions. Foreign pay is tax exempt—so no one would stay over there. So we all came home. And then they started hiring two guys to do one job. They just worked a month on and a month off. The companies actually found that it was cheaper, rather than maintain families overseas and pay for schooling and transport and vacation pay and all that—they just had us live at home and we'd work a month overseas and then a month home. I did that for years.

GOODSILL: Oh. Wow. That's tough.

BARTON: Well, you get used to it. It makes the women pretty—

GOODSILL: Maybe it's harder on the women than the men?

BARTON: Well, it takes a strong woman, but I had one.

GOODSILL: What is your wife's name?

BARTON: Her name is Linda [maiden name Sides].

GOODSILL: And did you happen to meet her out here in Sugar Land.

BARTON: No, I met her in Austin. I had a summer job one time, working for C & S Sporting Goods, and she was a secretary for C & S Sporting Goods. So that's where I met her.

GOODSILL: And your children?

BARTON: I have two girls and five granddaughters.

GOODSILL: Good for you! And do any of them live in this area?

BARTON: No, they all live in the Medina area, 28 miles south of Kerrville.

GOODSILL: So you all live up near there.

BARTON: Yeah.

GOODSILL: Oh that's nice – to be together. In your Sugar Land years, what students did for recreation and relaxation.

BARTON: Did a lot of fishin' and huntin'! (laughs)

GOODSILL: Do you remember the area around here being quite different than it is now?

BARTON: Oh yeah. In those days, you could go anywhere. You didn't have to ask anybody. If you wanted to walk across someone's property to get to Oyster Creek or something, you didn't have to ask anybody. And no one ever said anything. And we didn't hurt anything. It was a terrific place for kids to grow up.

GOODSILL: It helped to form your character in some way?

BARTON: I wouldn't blame Sugar Land for that! (chuckles)

GOODSILL: (laughs) How many of your classmates would you say worked for Imperial?

BARTON: Not more than two or three. Leon Anhaiser and maybe Allen Darnell. I don't really know. My class was pretty exceptional. I'm just thinking they MUST have been because about twenty of us wound up with college degrees. Leon Anhaiser graduated from LSU, David Armstrong graduated from Princeton, Landy Miller graduated from Stanford, Kenneth Albers graduated from Rice, Tommy Cason graduated from Texas. So there's a pretty accomplished bunch.

GOODSILL: And where did you go to school?

BARTON: Texas—the University of Texas.

GOODSILL: Was that a good experience for you?

BARTON: Yeah. I was in the first class that Darrell Royal recruited.

GOODSILL: So you continued to play sports?

BARTON: Yes. I lettered three years at Texas.

GOODSILL: Good for you! Yeah, it DOES sound like your class was very accomplished.

BARTON: And we were one of the bigger classes. Most of the classes had 16 to 21-22 and our class just happened to have 26. At one time we had 32 kids. And they didn't split the class and put on another teacher, the teachers just made do with what they had.

GOODSILL: Sounds like it. I was going to ask how many of your classmates went to college but you sort of answered that already!

BARTON: Well, I think probably 20 of us graduated.

GOODSILL: That's amazing, isn't it! Very good.

BARTON: And I think that all goes back to Mr. White, because before Mr. White, not many kids went to school from Sugar Land.

GOODSILL: That's very inspiring. A good story. So, what's your favorite memory of Sugar Land?

BARTON: Oh, I don't know! (both laugh) People and the friends. It was quite a unique little place. You know, Sugar Land was unique in that—there might have been one or two what we would call 'rich' in those days—but there were no poor people. Everyone either worked for Sugarland Industries or they worked for the sugar company or they worked for Marshall Canning Company or they worked for Humble. There were a lot of kids from the prison system out here and in those days, there were five prison farms out here. So there were really no poor, poor people. No one had a lot of money, but—

GOODSILL: Everybody was employed, everybody had a house—a place to live.

BARTON: Right.

GOODSILL: Which makes an interesting kind of society, doesn't it.

BARTON: A pretty good place to grow up. And we just had the free run of everything. It was six miles to the Humble Camp out here, and by the time we got to twelve–fourteen years old, it was three miles to the Brazos River, it was six miles to town. Our parents had NO clue where we were at on any one day. We may be fishing in Oyster Creek, we may be fishing in the Brazos River, but we could all swim like a fish and if we got out of line, somebody would stop the pickup and dust our britches, and (chuckles) send us on down the road.

GOODSILL: That's a very good interview. I'm glad I got to talk to you. I'm glad you took the time to talk to us.

BARTON: 'Preciate it.

GOODSILL: You bet.