

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Robert Newton Baker**

Interview Date: 11/17/2015

Interviewer: Bill Duggan

Transcriber: Bob Gaffney

Location: 307 Fort St., Richmond, Texas

5 Pages



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Transcript

DUGGAN: Today is November 17th, 2015. My name is Bill Duggan. I'm interviewing Robin Baker. This interview is being conducted by the Fort Bend County Historical Commission and as part of the Oral History series on the history of the building at 307 Fort Street, Richmond Texas. I'd like you to start with your full name and date of birth.

BAKER: My given name is Robert Newton Baker and I was born 5/29/1959.

DUGGAN: It's our understanding that this building has had three separate usages over the years. First it was the Fort Bend County Jail, and then the Fort Bend County Detention Center, and currently the Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management. Would you tell us which of these usages you're familiar with and your involvement with them?

BAKER: I was hired in the beginning of 1998 by the Fort Bend County Fire Marshal's Office. At that time the Fort Bend County Fire Marshal was the Emergency Management Coordinator and was housed in this office. So it was the Fire Marshal and the Emergency Management Coordinator together. The Fire Marshal's name was Vance Cooper. I was probably the third person or the second person hired. The office was small at that time so we had the whole building to ourselves. It still had the old jail cells downstairs and upstairs. They had just started the process to remove them. We were housed in this building for at least three or four years. It was just us in here. When I was on-call, we would get called out to a fire or whatever at two o'clock in the morning and we would come in here. There was nobody here. It was just me or whoever it was in the building.

DUGGAN: You were hired as the deputy?

BAKER: I was hired as an Arson Investigator for the Fire Marshals Office.

DUGGAN: Was that for the whole county?

BAKER: Yes. During a fire they would dispatch us to wherever the fire was in the county.

DUGGAN: I know Richmond, Rosenberg, and Missouri City, had their own fire departments. Did they have their own investigators?

BAKER: At that time, some of them did, but there were a lot of times they would call us for assistance because we were on-call 24/7. Then a majority of the county was still unincorporated. We responded to all unincorporated areas. After three years they split the Fire Marshal and Emergency Management. The Fire Marshals Office went to a building on the other side of the Sheriffs Office. Emergency Management stayed here.

DUGGAN: How did this facility work for you?

BAKER: There was plenty of room because there was nobody in here but us. My office was back here in the corner jail cell on this (second) floor. We had some part time people that came in every once in awhile and we were all housed in here. The Fire Marshal was downstairs. The Emergency Management Coordinator was downstairs where Jeff's (Braun) office is. We had this whole building here.

DUGGAN: So how many people?

BAKER: There was the Fire Marshal, the Deputy Fire Marshal was Curtis Brown, Linda Barnes, Gary Tilton, and me.

DUGGAN: I guess it didn't have the electronics it does today?

BAKER: There was none of that, only jail cells. They had some trustees that were coming in and out but they stopped that, so it was still intact as a jail. We used this back room as our office.

DUGGAN: Interesting they kept finding uses for the building. Do you have any stories, unusual occurrences?

BAKER: Oh, you've probably already been told. The place was haunted. At two o'clock in the morning I'd go to my office to log in evidence and I could hear noise coming up and down the stairs or a door shutting.

DUGGAN: I haven't heard any of these stories.

BAKER: During the daytime not so much, but at night investigators on call would have to come to the office. You're in this whole building by yourself. You could hear everything in here. You're the only one in here and there would be clanking, doors slamming, footsteps in the building. At first you're wondering, "Who's here?" But then, after a little while, you just ignored it.

DUGGAN: Part of the job.

BAKER: Yeah. Miss Barnes was the one that said its haunted originally. When they moved me and Curtis downstairs there was a lot of movement on the staircase, and doors upstairs. Those big jail cell doors are metal to metal so you always hear that. Sometimes the phone would ring and there would be nobody on the other end.

DUGGAN: Wow. Interesting. Did anybody ever investigate that?

BAKER: Not to my knowledge. I think it was just kind of common knowledge.

DUGGAN: So, any other interesting stories you can think of?

BAKER: No, the historical building itself, I'm sure when it was a juvenile facility, of course there was more than one person in here. I don't know if they would ever feel the same thing or not but I know when you're in here by yourself, it's kind of like your hair stands up on the back of your neck. That type of stuff. After a little while it was mostly very unusual noises. I mean a door shut is a door shut but these doors weigh maybe three, four hundred pounds?

DUGGAN: I opened one of them a while ago and looked around. It was heavy!

BAKER: Most of the time we had a jail key. The key to our office down here on the end opened with a jail key. We could open it. We could close it. Whoever would come up here could get the key, but you could hear the clanking. You got to remember that all of this was a jail cell so it was all metal and brick. It's a stout building. It's probably one of the stoutest buildings in the county. I mean, the way it's built and what it was built with. It also echoes a lot.

DUGGAN: Is there anything about the construction of the building?

BAKER: I really don't know. I was new. I moved here from south Texas in 1998 when I got hired. This is where I started, in this building.

DUGGAN: It's pretty centrally located for the County at that time. Did that work out well for you?

BAKER: Yes.

DUGGAN: Can you think of any other unusual experiences associated with this building?

BAKER: I'd lock a door and I'd go back out and the door wouldn't be locked. The lights would be cut on when I know they were cut off.

DUGGAN: Hmmm! After you left here, where was the Fire Marshal's Office?

BAKER: It was behind the jail where the Adult Probation Department is. There's an older building there.

DUGGAN: Where was it prior to that?

BAKER: We were there a couple years and then they decided to build the Gus George Academy. They were going to stick us in there but they had to get us out of that building to move other people in there so they moved us to a double-wide trailer on the corner of Legion where the Vehicle Maintenance is. We were in that double-wide for a couple of years until they got everything finished and we moved where we are currently. Since I've been here we moved four times.

DUGGAN: You're still with the Fire Marshal's Office?

BAKER: I'm just a Lieutenant there. The Fire Marshal is Mark Flathouse.

DUGGAN: Do you still do investigations?

BAKER: Yes. I still do the same thing. Twenty-eight years.

DUGGAN: You've investigated a lot of fires?

BAKER: Yep, sure have.

DUGGAN: Any other stories about the building that you think might be of historical interest?

BAKER: Not really. She's just an old building. A well-built, old building.

Interview ends