

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Roberta Jean Jester Court**

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Interviewer: Roberta Terrell

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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*Jean & Charles Court, 2009*

*Transcript*

TERRELL: When and where were you born?

COURT: I was born in Houston, December 3, 1934.

TERRELL: Tell me how your family came to live in Stafford.

COURT: I married into Stafford. I married Charles Court in November 1959.

TERRELL: What was your maiden name?

COURT: Roberta Jean Jester.

TERRELL: What business were the Courts in?

COURT: The hardware business for the last 40 years or longer than that. I don't know exactly when it started. My father-in-law came to Stafford in 1919, at the request of his uncle, Frank Cangelosi, who bought a lot of property around the railroad in Stafford partly because it had the cotton gin on it. He had been on an excursion with a real estate person to Sugar Land, and on the way to Sugar Land they went through Stafford. He was attracted to the area and the cotton gin, so he bought quite a bit of property, a lot of it from the railroad. There was a small store and a couple of small houses, and the gin on that property. My father-in-law was at Allen Military Academy at the time. Mr. Cangelosi invited him to come and run that little store for him, so he did. He was twenty years old at the time. He was born in 1899.

In a short while, within a year or so, his brother, J. J. Court, who was Buster's father, came to Stafford and went into business with him in the store. In 1926 his brother-in-law, T. F. Noto, came into the business as well. I have a picture with all three names on the sign. Then there were some hard times so Noto got out. For ten years or so there were different partnerships but they were always in the grocery or general merchandise store. The hardware store, set up as it is now, is probably from the mid-1950s. Court Hardware has been a fixture in Stafford since then. My father-in-law had it and he retired in 1960. Charles and his brother, J. C., took over. J. C. retired in 2000. Charles retired just last year and our son, Chris, owns it now.



TERRELL: How many children do you have?

COURT: We have four. Charles Vincent Court, III, whom we call Chip, was born in 1961. Christopher Jacob Court (Chris) was born in 1963. Jennifer Kathryn Court Hammer was born in 1969. Janette Louise Court Keeton was born in 1973. We have fourteen grandchildren (as of 2016)! They did what the Gospel said. They went out and multiplied. (laughter)

TERRELL: What was Stafford like when C. V. Court, Sr. arrived?

COURT: There were not very many Hispanic people here at that time, which always seems to surprise people. But there was a community of black people, mostly sharecroppers. The businesses that were here were necessary to support farmers. There wasn't much of a town, as such, but there was a blacksmith shop and grocery and hardware. Those early residents were, for the most part, in Missouri City. The business area was around the cotton gin and the railroad in Stafford. There was a railroad station there and a big water tower. There has been a post office here since 1900 or even before that. It was always in the back of the hardware store or grocery store, or whatever they were operating at the time. They had the contract for the post office.

TERRELL: Were there any homes in Stafford?

COURT: There were, but they were sparse, mostly small farm houses. My father-in-law built a little brick house that was on what is now North Main, on the property where the City Hall complex is now. Cash's house is a brick house on Stafford Road, and there were rental houses that I think Mr. Vaccaro owned, going up and down Stafford Road. Beyond the few houses were farms.

TERRELL: What did they raise?

COURT: I think it was mostly cotton and vegetables, more truck farming.

TERRELL: Is the hardware store the same as it used to be?

COURT: Oh, no. The old hardware store faced North Main, on the corner of Avenue F and North Main. It was a two-story building at one time. My father-in-law and his wife, his brother, J. J. Court and his wife, and Noto and his wife all lived above the store for a while. My husband wasn't born yet, but there were several children who also lived up there.

In one of the pictures you can see the storefront and the upstairs. There's a clothesline hanging with clothes on it! That building burned in 1927 and they rebuilt in the same location. That building burned again in 1953. Then they built that little strip center that faces Avenue F — it's the same property but instead of facing North Main, they faced Avenue F. The hardware store was located on the



end of that property. Next to it was the grocery store and the post office and Lap's Drug Store. The building the hardware is in now, which faces South Main, was built in 1968. There was no South Main when the building faced the railroad tracks. What is North Main was the only road through town. South Main was not put in until after World War II. It was started before the war, but was not completed. Those projects were postponed during the war years. I'm not sure of the date, but I think it was the late 1940s before South Main was completed and created the island.

TERRELL: What about civic involvement?

COURT: My father-in-law died in 1981 and I only knew him as my father-in-law. By then he was elderly, very jovial and funny. But when I researched the book I learned he was really a man with a vision. (Jean Court and Sadie Williams wrote "The History of Stafford, Texas") He had a high school education but he had a lot of confidence in the community and in the potential of the community. He just got things done! I'm sure he didn't do it alone, but he was a big talker and he got things done. After the first fire, they dug a big pond and filled it with water. Every morning (I heard), he filled that ditch back up. After the second fire, they had that water to help fight that second fire. It was on his property and he was always very generous, letting different organizations meet on his property. Once the families moved out of the building and got houses, they converted the upstairs and had meetings up there. One of the churches, which evolved into the Full Gospel Fellowship, first got started with a few elderly ladies meeting up there. He was very, very generous with everything he had.



They always had the contract for the post office and it was always in the rear of their store. In the 1960s or 1970s (I'm not sure of the year) they built the building that faces South Main, for the post office. They leased it to the government with a very long lease for a small amount of money, just to have a post office building in Stafford. The only reason I'm aware of that, is that after he died, we found out he was tied into this very long lease for a minimum amount of money, in order to get the post office in Stafford.

There was no water or sewer system. Actually, the water was piped from the cotton gin. People had open ditches. He and several people from Stafford and Missouri City got together to go to Austin to petition for a water district. They did all of the legwork and organizing because the city didn't really have any funds to speak of. He actually put up the bond to guarantee the water district.

He was a member of the Volunteer Fire Department and he drove a school bus. Stafford didn't incorporate until 1956 and he was on the first city council and served until 1965. To me, he was instrumental in getting the city going where it needed to go.

TERRELL: Was it your husband who was a director of Texas Commerce Bank?

COURT: Yes, Charles Vincent Court, Junior.

TERRELL: What about the East Fort Bend Chamber of Commerce?

COURT: That's him, too.

My father-in-law and several other people got the charter for the First National Bank of Stafford, which is the building that city hall now occupies. The bank took a picture of the youngest stockholders. He gave stock to each of his grandchildren, of which he had four at that time, and he gave stock to each of his children. He was instrumental in getting Sugar Land (Boots Helmcamp, Ray Anhauser and some of the Sugar Land bankers) to get the charter for the bank so we could have a bank in Stafford.



*Charles Vincent Court, second from right, with grandchildren as youngest stockholders.*

That bank was then acquired by the National Bank of Commerce and that's when they moved to where they are now, on US-59 and it's now a Chase Bank. But when it was National Bank of Commerce, Charles, Jr. was a director for them for ten years or so.

TERRELL: How would you describe Stafford compared to the other towns in the area?

COURT: Stafford took a different direction. For one thing, we are constrained size-wise. We are 9 square miles and that is all we're ever going to be because we are surrounded by Missouri City, Sugar Land and Houston.

TERRELL: How was it different from the other towns when you first moved here?

COURT: I think the difference was mostly that there was no distinct residential area. There were a few houses here and there, but when we married in 1959, there was nothing to buy and the only rental houses were Mr. Vaccaro's houses that are on Stafford Road as you go toward Beltway 8. We had to get on a waiting list, so we lived in Houston until we were able to move. It was about a year and a half. Mr. Brinkman, who had an egg farm in what's now Quail Valley, owned some property on the other side of Main Street. He opened up a little section of lots for you to buy a lot. There were about 6 or 7 lots on each side of that street.

We bought one of those lots but we didn't build over there. Mr. Brinkman sold those lots. My father-in-law bought one, my brother-in-law, J.C. Court, bought one; J. P. Court bought one and we did too. That's where Sadie lives, on West Bend Drive. But there was no neighborhood of houses like there is in Missouri City and Sugar Land and the other areas.

TERRELL: I guess neighborhood is the key word.

COURT: Right. It's something I've commented to my children about. We're in the same house we've always been in since 1962. Stafford didn't develop that way. The railroad cuts Stafford in half, and I think that has a lot to do with the way businesses developed. The city has really made it a project to go after businesses, stressing commercial development rather than residential development. Sadie [Williams] lives on that side of the railroad tracks, I live on this side of the railroad tracks. The railroad track runs along Main Street with parts of Stafford on each side. And once you got out of the downtown area, it was farms. Property has come available now and been sold. In a lot of cases it was for commercial development, not residential.

TERRELL: Why do you think they went after businesses?

COURT: Tax purposes probably.

TERRELL: I know at one time they said they didn't want any more churches.

COURT: When we researched the book ten years ago Stafford had 60-something churches. I was trying to go around and take pictures of all these churches. A large percentage of them were not 'churches in church buildings'. They were storefront. I would look through the glass and there would be a little sign on the door. In my mind they weren't really churches. I don't know what the economics are for the taxes, but it seemed to be a way to get around paying taxes.

They were in shopping centers where there was no parking except on Sunday morning. Some of them would have 20 members. Since then there have been some HUGE churches built in the area. Along 5th Street, the Indian churches and close to where Luby's is, there is a Chinese church. They have a number of acres — looks like a 5 to 10 acre tract to me — with great big buildings. We have several of those. Stafford is so small and so confined and the churches don't pay taxes, which makes it difficult for the city. When a church goes into a space in a shopping center, that doesn't generate any sales tax. I'm sure the Mayor will have plenty to say about all that!

TERRELL: I know you grew up in Houston and you just told me that you still live in the same house.

COURT: After we married we lived in Houston about a year, and then moved into one of Mr. Vaccaro's rent houses when it became available. We built our house in 1962, on Rose Ann Street, which was an area that had been farmland. It was cut up into lots and sold. We had just bought the lot from Mr. Brinkman on the other side of the train tracks. Mr. Vaccaro offered us an even swap for one of his lots because we were going to build right away. The lot we bought from Mr. Brinkman was 70 feet by 120 feet and the lot we have now is 90 feet by 150 feet. Personally I was apprehensive about living on the same street with my father-in-law, my brother-in-law, etc. I grew up in Houston where you are somewhat isolated from your neighbors. This was a lot of togetherness for me! The lot was so much bigger, and it was open. They put the street in for our house in 1962, and we're still there. I learned to love the closeness, friendliness and security of small town living!

TERRELL: Where did you grow up in Houston?

COURT: The war years we were away. I was born on Snover Street, which was between Washington Avenue and Memorial Drive area. You know where Saint Thomas High School is on Memorial Drive? Well, from our backyard that was all woods, you could go to Saint Thomas through those woods. There was a path. We lived there until maybe 1941. My dad was forty in September 1941, so when the draft came, he missed it. He worked for the Dan Cohen Shoe Company, which was a wholesale shoe company. In Houston, they had the White House Department Stores, I think. During the war years when so many men were drafted we lived in Memphis, in Paducah, Cincinnati, and Dallas twice. They would send him to a shoe store to hire women and train them — my mother worked, too — until he felt like that store could operate on its own, and then we'd go somewhere else. Then we came back to Houston when I was in 7th grade. We lived near Garden Villas, out by where Hobby Airport is. That's where I lived when I married Charles.

TERRELL: How has Stafford changed in your lifetime?

COURT: Starting with the street we lived on, it was gravel from Main Street. Stafford Road didn't really go anywhere; it made a curve around and became Riceville School Road, which went on around and became Roark Road. I'm not sure where Riceville School Road went. Frank Lane and Rose Ann were all gravel and shell dust. When you had the windows open, all the dust came in.

There's not been a tremendous amount of change because the central area is fixed in size. Every time you hear complaints about the city trying to clean up things, they always talk about the hubcap shop on Main Street. But everything is grandfathered so they can't close those types of shops. We have the school district, which made a big difference.

TERRELL: When did that happen?

COURT: In August 1982 my older daughter, Jennifer, was in the first freshman class that went all four years to Stafford High School. She graduated in 1987.

TERRELL: What is your favorite memory of living in Stafford?

COURT: I thought I would not like everybody knowing my business. I remember when we got married, and we bought our first furniture from Cangelosi Furniture Store, we bought our groceries at the Cangelosi Grocery Store. I can remember thinking, "Oh goodness, that means you are pushing your basket down the aisle and everybody can see what you are buying! Or you hang your clothes on the line and everybody can see your clothes."



Of course, I was young and not buying groceries or hanging clothes on the line much anyway, but I thought that would be such an invasion of privacy. I thought I wouldn't like that. It didn't take me long to realize how comforting and secure it is to know everybody in town. You don't look in other people's grocery baskets because you don't care anyway!

For my kids, I think it was wonderful for them. We've talked so many times with my children and grandchildren about how careful they are now with their children. My boys would get up in the morning, pack a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a canteen of water, and get on their bicycles. W. K. M was in full operation on South Main and there was nothing between us and them. That was all farmland. When they would dig up one crop and before they planted something else, there would be big clumps of dried clay dirt. The boys would build forts out there. If I had binoculars I could look out and see them. There was a pond of water and they knew they couldn't go over there. But they'd be gone all day and it never occurred to me to worry about them or to wonder where they were.

I can't remember what prompted it, but J. P. Court was Chief of Police in Bellaire and something happened. Chip was talking about what he would do if something happened to Charles and me. He said, "Well, I would go over to Mr. J. P.'s house." And I asked why. He said, "Because he's got a GUN." (laughter) And I got so tickled. It's a very secure feeling when you go to church on Sunday and you know everybody in church, and in the grocery store. I used to say if I wanted to grocery shop in a hurry, I'd go to Sugar Land because it would take me twice as long in Stafford. I would see someone I knew in every aisle and stop to visit. I realized it was a wonderful way to live and I regret that my children don't have that same opportunity, even if they lived in Stafford now.

When I go to church on Sunday, depending on which Mass I go to, I may not know very many people at the service. It's a way of life that is gone. And the same thing with school. It was so easy with my girls because when they started dating, I knew the families of the boys in their class for the most part. I have a 17-year-old granddaughter and her father (my son) is always moaning and groaning about letting your daughter go out with somebody you don't know and you don't know their family. He gives everybody the third degree. He wants to meet the parents. I don't know what families do now. It's a way of life that is gone, and that's sad.

My kids played outside all the time and we didn't lock our doors. You were quick to help your neighbors. That was when you could go on vacation you had somebody who would pick up your mail and your paper or water your plants or come feed your dog. People don't do that anymore. Where I am, we have one neighbor who has been there almost as long as we have, and that's the Koudelkas. I feel like it was the best of times. My children grew up in the best possible time.

TERRELL: What type of education did your children get here?

COURT: All of them went through grammar school at E. A. Jones Elementary. My oldest son went to Missouri City Junior High and two years at Dulles High School. That's when Fort Bend was just mushrooming. I had a couple of things happen. I saw a woman at a church social in the fall and she asked if Chip was my son. I said yes, and she said, "What a delightful young man!" Then I saw her again at the end of that year, and told her that Chip had enjoyed her class. She said, "Who?" And I said, "Chip, my oldest son. You have him for English or whatever." And she said, "Oh, I do?" And she didn't know. I thought, "Oh, my goodness!" Something else happened, and I told Charles, "Okay, it's too big for us." So I moved Chip and my younger son, Chris, who was just starting high school, to Strake Jesuit in Houston. Both of my girls went to Stafford High School. I think they got a good education at Stafford High School and my boys did at Jesuit. I might be exaggerating a little bit, but I want to emphasize how wonderful the school district was. Times have changed and the school is not where it should be.

Every time a new Superintendent comes in, I hope this will be the one. You read these wonderful stories in Reader's Digest about these educators who come in and turn a school around. I wish that would happen to Stafford. We're kind of far removed from that now. My youngest daughter is 38 (43 in 2016) so it's been a long time since she graduated. The school was very small, all their teachers knew them and we knew all their teachers. The beautiful part was that for any activity, they did not have to be outstanding in order to participate. Every sports team needed players so they were solicited to play sports.

TERRELL: I think that's a good thing. You're not ostracized if you are not the best.

COURT: Right. There were some stars that came through there, but most of the kids were just ordinary. Both my girls played volleyball and basketball, and ran track. Jennifer played tennis. They were both cheerleaders. They were both president of the student council when their time came. They were able to excel.

When they were getting ready to go to college, one of Jan's friends who went to A & M was talking about whether they wanted to be a little fish in a big pond or a big fish in a little pond. I thought that at the high school they were big fish in a little pond. So for my girls, it was perfect. Classes were small. The teachers were so dedicated and excited, because they were doing everything at a new school and everything was fresh and new.

TERRELL: What do you remember about segregation in Stafford?

COURT: Of course I wasn't here in the early years. But I was here in the 1960s. I don't remember any problems.

TERRELL: Did they have their own school?

COURT: M. R. Wood was the black school. I don't remember any problems. The black people, for the most part, lived near each other. Stafford didn't have a cohesive residential area. There was no question of a black family moving in, it wasn't an area where people changed jobs and moved. These were farmers and business people. It's only been recently that people live out here and work in Houston. For the most part, people who lived here worked at W. K. M or worked at Imperial Sugar. People didn't change jobs. It was a very stable, and stagnant in a way, community. Where the black families lived, whether it was on Stafford Road or on the other side of the highway, they had always been there. They worked on people's farms, such as the Robinsons, the Brinkmans, and I don't remember any problems.

TERRELL: What did the children do for recreation other than build forts?

COURT: Well, they stayed outside all day! They rode their bicycles everywhere and stayed outside. They built forts in trees. Nobody had a computer. I don't know when Sesame Street started. I know the two boys didn't watch it. I think the two girls did. Cartoons after school and on Saturday morning was such a treat. It was the first thing they lost when they needed to be punished. They played a lot of board games. In the summertime, they were outside all the time playing baseball, football etc.

TERRELL: The girls, too?

COURT: The girls, too. They played hide-and-go-seek after dark, which was SO much fun. Jennifer ran across a cable from a light pole and got a big scar across her chest.

She had a little boyfriend when she was in 7th or 8th grade and he lived in Dove Country on the other side of Main Street. He would walk from Dove Country to our neighborhood and they would walk around the block, holding hands. It was so sweet! They didn't watch much television.

TERRELL: What about medical care?

COURT: I took them in to a pediatrician on Sunset. Just drove straight in on Main Street to Sunset. We went to Texas Children's Hospital a few times with emergencies. Went to Dr. Wheeler in Sugar Land for dentistry. I don't remember feeling the least bit deprived or not taken care of.

TERRELL: Was there a hospital in Sugar Land then?

COURT: There was Polly Ryon in Richmond. But we went into Houston. My obstetrician was in Houston. None of us had any serious illnesses or accidents. And going in Main Street, you didn't come to a traffic light until you got to Post Oak Drive. I remember when one of the babies was born, it was the middle of the night and we got to Post Oak and caught the light red. I told Charles to go through and he said, "We can't run this light." There was NOBODY coming. But it wasn't that difficult to get to the Medical Center because there wasn't much out here then.

TERRELL: Did you have some old photos we could borrow and copy?

COURT: I do.

TERRELL: I'm sure I've forgotten to ask you something. How did you meet your husband?

COURT: Oh, my goodness! Well, he will tell you that he was drunk when he met me, but he really wasn't. I met him at a dance. We were both there with other people. I was very coy. He wanted my phone number and I said, "Oh, you can look it up, if you want." So he did, and he called me up and asked me out for Friday, which was the day after Christmas. He came and we went bowling. It was really hard because I lived in Houston and he lived in Stafford. It was a long drive and he worked at the hardware store. So he did an awful lot of driving.

TERRELL: Can you think of anything else you'd like to add?

COURT: I wish Stafford had developed a little differently than it did. I think it had such a community of really great families, who are mostly still here, except we're all old now.

There hasn't been an influx of people to take our places. I think Stafford hasn't emphasized that enough. It's very much a one-person town, which is the Mayor [Leonard Scarcella] and he's done great things for Stafford. He's had a lot of vision. No matter what anyone might say or complain about him, one thing they could NEVER say is that he has not always done what HE thought was best for Stafford. He has always kept Stafford number one. And if he thinks it's the right thing to do, I don't care. You're not getting anywhere if he's committed to that. He does what he thinks is best. And it has been best.

I think now it would be very helpful if we had some other input. As I said, I don't think the city has developed into a community. I wish it had, and I think it could have. I don't know if it's too late now. We're diverse now. We have a large Indian community. We have a large Vietnamese community. And a very large Spanish presence and a very large black presence. I think everybody gets along fine. I think he's done a great job in including all people. I don't ever hear anybody complain about things not being fair or equal. But I don't think there's anything the city has done to bring people together and provide services for the citizens.

TERRELL: It's not as cohesive as it was when you first moved here?

COURT: Right. It was one thing when they built the school district because they had to get it approved. Do you know the story about the busing of the children? On the other side of Main Street, where Stafford Road comes in to North Main, and dead ends at the railroad track here, E. A. Jones is over here and Stafford Road comes here. On either side of Stafford Road, before UPS bought that property, were rent houses. Fort Bend ISD was just mushrooming with all the new development and as a cost measure they decided they wouldn't bus children who lived within a two-mile radius of the schools.

The city really tried to get Fort Bend to bus those children because they had to cross the railroad track, cross North Main, walk down and then cross South Main, to get to E. A. Jones Elementary School. Fort Bend wouldn't hear of it. Some gentleman (I don't remember who it was) made the comment that if you're so worried about your children, then you bus them. So that's what they did. The Mayor and others talked about it and decided they would take care of their own children. When they went to file for whatever you have to, to establish a school district, (it was right after Westheimer in Houston had filed and been turned down — it was called 'white flight'), because we had more minorities in the area and at that time it wasn't blacks, it was Hispanics, it was approved.



They called it a loophole in the law and that was closed after Stafford formed their district. There won't be another municipal school district in the state of Texas. But it came about predominantly because of busing the children within the two-mile limit.

TERRELL: This has been very interesting and I appreciate your coming.

Interview ends