

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Ron Miller**

Interview Date: 06/24/2011

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Comment: The interview was conducted at the Riverbend Country Club, Sugar Land, Texas during a Sugar Land High School Reunion. Betty Parker Prasatik participated briefly in the interview.

11 Pages



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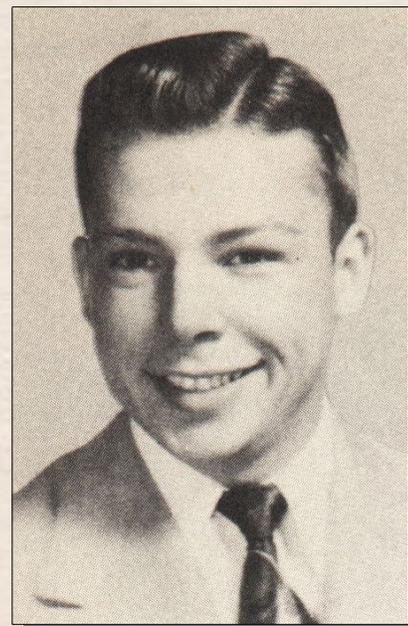
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Transcript

GOODSILL: So, let's start with some biographical information. Where were you born?

MILLER: I was born in Sugar Land, in Laura Eldridge Hospital on January 3, 1933.

GOODSILL: What brought your family to Fort Bend County?

MILLER: Well, my dad moved here as a young man from the Weimer, Texas, area. It was a little town called Oakland. His brother had acquired a job working for Imperial Sugar Company at the time. They were hiring, and as far as I know, that's the primary reason.

So Dad, James Joe Miller, left the farm and came to Sugar Land. His brother's name was Johnny Miller and they lived right next door, side-by-side houses. At the time, Dad was unmarried. He married the daughter of William Lawrence Scarborough who ran the Imperial Dairy in Sugar Land. Nan Scarborough was five years his junior, I believe, when they married. The Scarboroughs lived right across the street from the Johnny Millers and Daddy on Imperial Boulevard.

The story is that Daddy wasn't paying any attention to Nan. She didn't date or anything. One day, my mother whacked him with a radish and that started it all. After they married, they lived on Lakeview Boulevard until my grandmother, Nanny Scarborough, became ill and had to have an emergency appendectomy. My mother decided she needed to care for her mother, so they obtained the house that was immediately across the street or immediately adjacent to the Johnny Miller house. I grew up next door to my cousin, Vernon Miller, who is five years older than I.

GOODSILL: What work did your father do at the refinery?

MILLER: I don't know what his initial job was but he ended up as manager in the packaging and shipping department of the Imperial Sugar Company.



Ron Miller (l) spent a fair amount of time at the Imperial Dairy his grandfather ran. On more than one occasion Ron went out with Grandpa Scarborough to round up cows at milking time.

GOODSILL: How many kids were in your family?

MILLER: I have a younger brother, Lanny Miller. I am seven years his senior, short by one month. He presently lives in the Los Angeles area, Arcadia, California. He was in the same class with Leon Anhaizer. so there's an Anhaizer connection.

GOODSILL: Well, let's get to your Sugar Land days. Describe a normal day in Sugar Land in your childhood.

MILLER: Depends on whether it was summer, winter or fall, of course. I'd like to pick summer first. Summer was hot, sticky, and muggy because there was no air conditioning. We all ran around in short pants and bare-footed. We made mud pies at an early age, and after that, ran around with our BB guns. My earliest job that my parents paid me to do was to pick figs off of some large Magnolia fig trees that we had in our back yard on Imperial Boulevard.

GOODSILL: So, there were fig trees out there?

MILLER: Daddy planted them. They were the large Magnolia figs. I was permitted to sell those and keep the proceeds, except the figs that my mother canned. Of course, in those days, that was just about the time that World War II started. Work was a little bit more than just picking figs because Daddy had a Victory Garden. Our house backed on the railroad right-of-way, and he received permission from the railroad company, I think it was Santa Fe, to utilize some of the land that was immediately adjacent to our home for this Victory Garden as it was called.

Dad had a military exemption because he was a manager for the sugar company. Those were really some hard times for him and for the family, but they weathered the storm quite nicely. Until right at the end of the war, when he was just so tired that he was having trouble putting his on shoes because he was tilling the garden at night or whenever he could. We kidded around about that, because the light from the Char House shone down the railroad yard allowing him to plow the garden by the light.

See how lucky we are now? We go to the grocery store and we buy vegetables. Of course that was during the war and that was one of the things he did. We also raised chickens, fryers and hens, so that we had eggs. See how dated I am!

GOODSILL: And your mom worked just as hard as your dad.

MILLER: My mom worked very hard. It may be a slight exaggeration, but the story that I like to tell is that she had two dresses. She had one that she wore and rinsed out in the evening to put back on the next day, and she had one that she wore for Sunday. That was the name of the game. By today's standards, you would say that we were poor folk. But we didn't know any better. We were just as happy as we could be. She canned vegetables and did the fruit preserves.

GOODSILL: The food was pretty good?

MILLER: You bet, the best! We really had a good life. Grand. We had an experience that I'd like to relate to you. You know, we're going to be here all night! Do you realize that?

GOODSILL: I've got plenty of time.

MILLER: One of the things that I can relate to is that the Jess Pirtle family lived on the same street that we lived on, and Jess was one of the air raid marshals. One night we had a practice air raid and Mother had the pressure cooker going. We had to turn out all the lights during the air raid because everything had to be dark. She got hold of Mr. Pirtle and fussed at him and said, "How am I going to be able to use my pressure cooker just right if I can't see?" Well, he came in, and held the flashlight for Mother! (laughs)

GOODSILL: We have a great picture of Mr. Pirtle when he was a young man playing with his children. He was a very handsome and accomplished man.

MILLER: I shared quarters with John Pirtle at Baylor University for two years. That was a really great experience.

GOODSILL: Do you ever remember seeing any hobos? John mentioned them in his interview. [See John Pirtle interview.]

MILLER: Absolutely. One of my earliest recollections of the Depression era is just after we had moved to Imperial Boulevard. I think I was maybe two years old when the family moved from Lakeview to Imperial. People would come to the back door and ask for food. And our family was known to provide food. Mother and Daddy had a conversation standing in the kitchen of our little house one day. Mother told Daddy, "You've got to put the word out that we can no longer provide food because we don't have enough food to feed our own family." So the next time that somebody showed up at our doorstep asking for food, Dad told them. Some way or another, they had a way of communicating and that stopped it. They didn't continue to come to our back door.

GOODSILL: Isn't that interesting!

MILLER: It is. You think about the days, people at that time had grown up under a different set of circumstances. My daddy had come from a farm where his daddy, during one of the outbreaks of typhus fever in the Valley, had run a wagon train down there to provide supplies which helped people survive. Now how do we feel about that today? Would I run a wagon train to the Valley? Probably not.

GOODSILL: Well, the interesting thing is they helped as much as they could until they were tapped out and then they said no. People respected that. You don't remember being scared or intimidated by the hobos?

MILLER: No, I never was. I was never frightened by them. I was probably too young to be frightened for one thing. It just didn't occur to me at the time that there might be anything wrong.

GOODSILL: We've interviewed a couple of hobos who said they have kind of an underground communication system where they put an 'X' on a telephone pole or a fence which means 'these people are receptive in town' or 'don't bother these people'.

MILLER: I knew there was some way to communicate because after Mother and Dad had that conversation, and Dad talked to one of them, it stopped. I mean it stopped cold. No one came to the door after that.

GOODSILL: Do you remember after the war, if things began to feel more prosperous for you?

MILLER: Well, it did. Daddy was working a lot of overtime but there was nothing to spend money on because everything was going to the war effort. I don't know the dollars and cents of all this, but I know that there was a large amount of savings. When the war was over, it maybe took two years, I still remember Dr. Slaughter got a new Buick or Cadillac. He was downtown and everybody went to see the new car! All of a sudden things became available again. Instead of the ladies using a grease pencil to put the seams down the back of the legs, as if they had on stockings, now there were nylons. It was really obvious to those of us that were young and of an impressionable age.

GOODSILL: How long did your family live in the house on Imperial Boulevard?

MILLER: I think it was 1954 when the Sugarland Industries made a decision that they were going to no longer maintain the rental housing for the employees. When they made that decision, then they started opening up property for sale. My folks acquired property and we moved to Belknap Court. The word went out that they were no longer going to maintain these houses. If you want one of these houses, you can buy one but you have to find someplace to move it to.

GOODSILL: So did you buy a house or build a house?

MILLER: Daddy built a house when I was at Baylor.

GOODSILL: I bet that was a happy event for your family?

MILLER: It was. I still have a picture of my wife, Trinkka, up on the drain board installing shelf paper in the cabinets.

GOODSILL: Your family continued to live in Sugar Land?

MILLER: Yes, until my mother passed away in the year 2000.

GOODSILL: And your daddy?

MILLER: Daddy passed away, I think in 1995.

GOODSILL: You'd say they had pretty good lives living here?



*Ron's wife, Katherine
"Trinka" Miller in high
school.*

MILLER: Well, (laughing), I don't know. Define 'a pretty good life'. Yes, I would say they had a pretty good life. They put both me and my brother through university. They didn't have to provide all of that money because my brother and I both knew that we had to work if we wanted to go. It's a little bit different standard with some of the kids right now. I have a grandson and he's not real eager to raise a lot of money to go to school. He thinks that there will be money available. There you go! That's a weakness in my eyes. If you talk to my brother, he will tell you about a time when he was at Baylor and the only way that he could keep his feet dry was by putting cardboard in the bottom of his shoes. So we still weren't doing that well, that he could have new shoes. (laughs) We both learned to make do.

GOODSILL: I know you've just written a book on sports in Sugar Land. Tell me the title.

MILLER: *Halling the Ball*. *Halling*, as in Kenneth Hall.

GOODSILL: *Halling the Ball*. Tell me what inspired you to write the book.

MILLER: Carlos Tarver, Chuck Kelly and I had a meeting about two or three years ago. I think it was in the fall. They interviewed some of us about our high school days, primarily about sports. In the course of events, Carlos and I talked several times. I had written an article called 'The Auditorium', back when there was the promise of refurbishing the auditorium of the Sugar Land School. Carlos was impressed with that. I have no idea why. I think that article got auctioned off at a fundraiser for the Auditorium.

Out of the interview that we did with Chuck, Carlos, and Bruce Kelly I said, "Maybe you ought to start writin' this stuff down." And Carlos looked at me and he said, "You're the guy to do it." And I said, "Oh no, not me." Then I said, "You know, I could start putting some stuff together and you guys could do what you wanted to do with it."

So a long story made short, he started shoveling me information. I didn't have a scrapbook about what had happened. As a matter of fact, the only thing that I had that was left over from high school days was a 1951 yearbook. I didn't really have much of anything to start writing from except some wild memories. Many of them do not agree with what Kenneth Hall or the other guys remember. But then I was a senior the year that Kenneth Hall was a freshman. So my recall of those days was primarily based on the times leading up to when Kenneth came to play football. Those were good memories.

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Kenneth Hall's interview on the FBC Historical Commission Web Site at <http://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=40325>

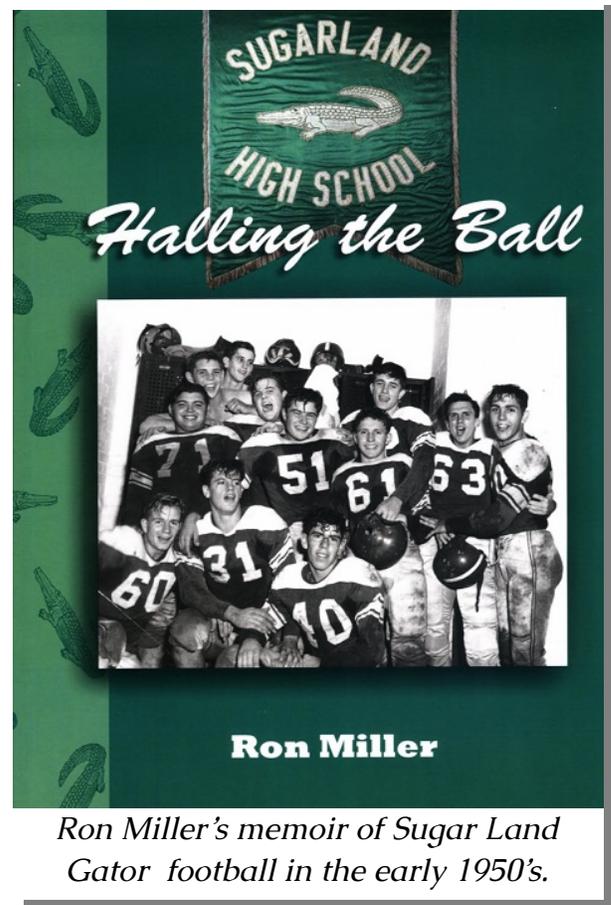
I could not have done any of this book, so to speak, without Carlos. He provided so doggone much incentive, it was sickening! I mean, he put a lot of pressure on me to do this. It turned out the equivalent of a couple of manuscripts which I sent to Carlos and Chuck. Chuck marked it up and sent stuff back to me. Then the pressure started to actually publish it. I knew nothing about publishing a book. Absolutely zip.

Then, one day, Chuck sent me an e-mail and I said, "Well, maybe I'll just look into it." He'd sent me several different firms for self-publishing. I checked into a couple of them, and I said, "I don't get a good feeling about these people." I finally went to a small printing firm in Oakhill, right outside of Austin, where we live now.

I talked to them and the guy gave me a quote, and he said, "Yeah, we'd do it. What are you going to do about a cover?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I don't have a cover. What do you think we ought to do about a cover?" And he didn't know. Carlos said, "Well, you ought to use the picture." I said, "What picture?" He said, "The picture." I said, "I don't know anything about a picture." He described the picture and I said, "I don't know anything about that picture. Would you email it to me?" And so he did. I printed it off on my computer and I looked at it, and I said, "Hey, I have a pretty good idea."

Not knowing anything about publishing, I found out from this printing firm in Oakhill that I needed to have it in a PDF file. I had no idea what a PDF file was. I said, "What's a PDF file? I'm just very naive about this and know nothing about it." So the gentleman told me what a PDF file looked like, and I said, "Well, okay." He said, "There's a firm in north Austin you really ought to also talk to. It's called Ginny's Printing. They do this sort of thing all the time."

So a day passed and I called Ginny's Printing. They invited me up. Meanwhile, my grandson put a frame around the picture, and it looked great. So I took that up to Ginny's Printing and talked to the two nice ladies up there. They told me what they could do and what it would cost. After some hemming and hawing about numbering the pictures (which are unnumbered in this book because I said, "No, I'm not changing the numbers on my pages!"). The lady who ended up doing the cover, Rebecca Bretz, a professional portrait painter said, "If I did this for you, I would need to do a spine and you don't have a spine." I said, "Okay." She said, "Well, what do you think you would want to put on spine?" I said, "Oh, what do you mean, put on?" She said, "Oh you know, some little something or another that would be kind of catchy." I said, "Oh yeah, alligators."



Ron Miller's memoir of Sugar Land Gator football in the early 1950's.

So I went home and in the course of continuing to get the offer, she sent me some tacky little alligators. One of them was a funny little alligator with a smile on his face and a pitchfork under his arm. I said, "Nah" So I contacted Chuck and said, "Can you get me a picture of the high school banner?" So that's where it came from.

He sent five or six different angles of the banner. I picked one and sent it to Rebecca Bretz. I said, "What about this?" She said, "Oh, great!" A few days later, you have no idea how many e-mails this took, she sent me two options. One without the banner and this one with the banner, of course, as it is published. I said, "That's the one." And that's what we did.

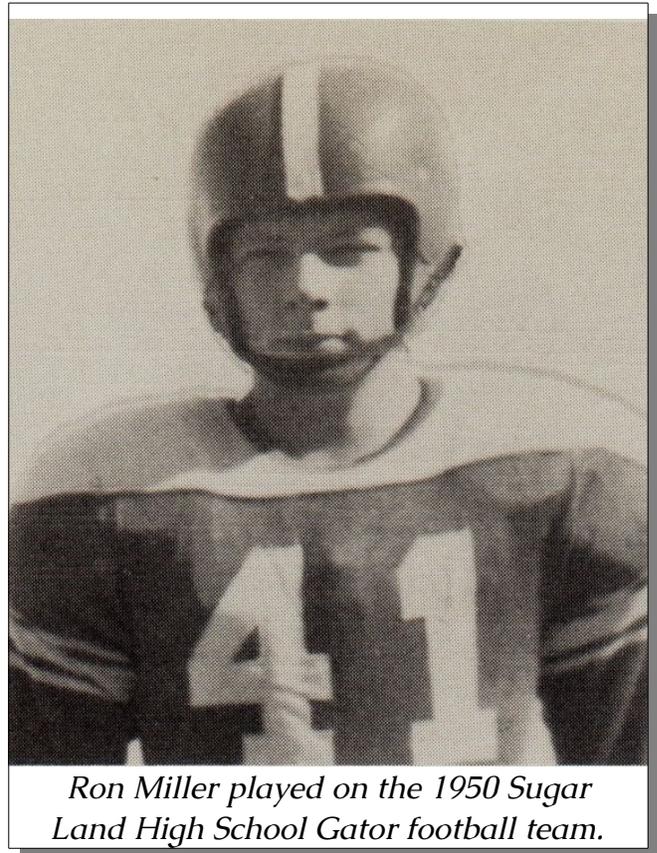
GOODSILL: Do you feel happy with the end product, the content and pictures?

MILLER: Oh, well it's my content! (both laughing)

GOODSILL: You had Carlos, Chuck, Ken, and all these editors you had to please!

MILLER: B. I. Webb wrote me and he said "Boy, this is all screwed up," or something in that vein. He said, "That didn't happen then. It didn't happen until two years later, you're wrong." I said, "I don't ever remember playing in anything but a plastic helmet." That was what the contention was over, at that time. "No, we had leather helmets," he said.

He told me about Johnny Walger, who played one year ahead of us, going to the bench one day with a leather helmet that was all messed up. So I relented. I said, "Okay, I don't remember." But I don't remember very well! If you read my introductory remarks, you will see that I classified this as a sports historical novel. There is stuff in this that I'm quite sure is not correct.



Ron Miller played on the 1950 Sugar Land High School Gator football team.

Marvin Olle, who worked for Visco Products, told me just a few minutes before you walked up that I was wrong about them pumping chemicals into the ditch. So I stood corrected on that. I said, "Well, just a minute. Let me get my pen out and I'll fix that for you." (laughing) You know, there may be at least four or five good lies in this. The one thing that is not a lie is the DVD of the Hempstead game, which is treated in here from the Houston Chronicle. I threw in a few imaginary things of my own from that game. But that one was played on Friday, December 13th, on Kenneth Hall's birthday. The newspaper had it wrong, they said December the 12th, 1952. On December 13th, 1952, Kenneth Hall scored every point that was scored in the game for Sugar Land High School. That's just *crème de la crème*, you know? Just terrific.

Do you know this lady? That lady walking right there? This lady right here was the leader of the band, Betty Parker Prasatik. She married Norman.

PRASATIK: I graduated in 1953. Who's he been talking about?

GOODSILL: He's doing a good job. (all laugh). Did I ask you what career you chose?

MILLER: Three of them. I retired as a Lt. Colonel in the Air Force with twenty-two years service. After that I was desperate to find a job. I was an air crew member in Strategic Air Command. That and Tactical Air Command were my flying experiences. I worked in Air Force Systems Command as a contracting officer. I moved on from there to the Secretary of the Air Force's office at the Pentagon. Finally I got tired and had a command at Vandenberg Air Force Base where we launched missiles down the western test range. So that was that career. I retired from the Air Force kind of quick. My wife's mother was ill and so we just decided to retire.

The unit I commanded merged with another organization, and so I was out of a job! I was offered some jobs that I thought were not what I wanted. The Air Force does that after a while, they'll offer you jobs not just send you places. So I left the service and moved back to Texas, retiring in Austin where we presently live.

I had majored in accounting at Baylor and I thought, well, my accounting is so old, nobody is going to pick me up for a job in accounting after retirement. So I sold real estate for two and one-half years. The market went crazy with all kinds of these high-finance risky things and I didn't want to sell to children any more. When I say children, I'm talking about first homes, that sort of thing. I left that and went to work for Farmers Insurance Group as an auditor. I had been an auditor in Air Force Systems Command in the Inspector General's office for a time, so that kind of worked nicely for me.

I went to work there getting promoted pretty quickly up the chain of command...that's Air Force talk! I became Treasurer for a really large insurance company that was related to Farmers, Texas Farmers Insurance Company. I did that until 1995 when I retired. Since then I have been active in volunteer work, primarily with our church and other matters.

GOODSILL: Like writing this book which took up three years of your life! (laughs)

MILLER: My wife's daddy was a Helmcamp and that's kind of an interesting story. The Helmcamps were really big in Sugar Land. Boots was her cousin. Her daddy, Herbert Helmcamp, was a bank teller for Sugar Land Industries. Then he went to Houston where he worked for Anderson Clayton, a big cotton company. He also managed Sartatia Dairy, which processed and delivered milk in Houston.

After so many years, they finally moved back to Sugar Land where he ran Sartartia Plantation. He did that until Clayton sold off Sartartia to New Territory.



*Katherine "Trinka Miller"
attended the June 2011 Sugar
Land High School Reunion.*

GOODSILL: Thank you for this interview!

Interview end

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Trinka's interview on the FBC Historical Commission Web Site at <http://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=42579>