

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewees: **Ruth Isabel Blasdel Werner**

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Interviewer: Bill Dugan

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

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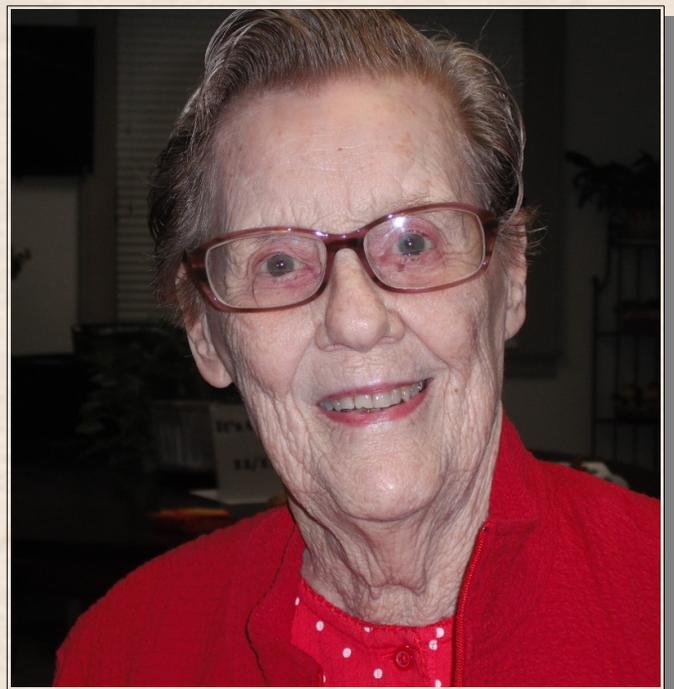
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*Transcript*

DUGAN: Ms. Werner, lets start with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

WERNER: I was born in Saint Joseph Hospital in Houston, but never resided in Houston. I was immediately brought back to Richmond. My mother and father lived here. I had an older brother and sister. I was the third in the family that eventually became seven children. I was the youngest for probably eight years before they decided to have four more children.

We lived across the river from Richmond, right at the end of the Brazos River Bridge. Our front yard practically connected to the bridge. If you walked across the bridge you jumped in our yard as soon as you got off. We lived there until I married. I graduated from Lamar Consolidated. I went to Richmond High School first and then Richmond and Rosenberg consolidated and so I went to a school in Rosenberg. My early school years were in Richmond at Jane Long Elementary. We lived less than a mile from Richmond so I walked to school everyday until the schools consolidated. Then I was bussed from Richmond. The bus would pick me up at my house because I lived more than a mile from the school in Rosenberg. So I could ride the bus the last two years of my schooling and be bussed over to Rosenberg (chuckle). In the mean time I walked the bridge everyday. I went away to Southwestern University in 1950.

DUGAN: You mentioned your mom and dad, what were their names?

WERNER: Oh, Daddy was Jacob and Mother was Ruth. Ruth and Jacob Blasdel. Daddy was the rural mail carrier for Richmond. Route Number One, his route went out south of Richmond to the Fairchild and Pleak area. I don't think he went all the way to Thompson. Then he had a chance to change routes. They made a route east and north of Richmond. So he went out 359 to Foster, almost to Fulshear and then it came back around by Harlem to Richmond. That was his last route. He was the rural mail carrier for about 44 years.

DUGAN: What brought them to this area?

WERNER: Mother was a native Houstonian, but Daddy's family was from Indiana and they heard of good land or something so Daddy and his family - there was eight, no there were nine children because they lost one. Nine children on a train coming from Indiana to Texas. (laughter) I am glad I wasn't one of those nine children on that train because they put all their animals in one half of a car and they had the other half.

This is how they traveled from Indiana to Texas. I can't imagine this but I have it all written up at home; how the mother managed all of these nine children on this train. It sounds more than I would have wanted to deal with.

DUGAN: Do you remember what year that was?

WERNER: That was 1905. Daddy and his parents and his brothers and sisters all came to Texas. They bought property on the east side of the river. That's where I grew up in, on part of this property that his parents had bought in 1905.

DUGAN: Did your mother work or was she busy with children?

WERNER: No, mother never worked. Mother had the first three and then like I said there were eight years before she had any more, but she never worked out of the house. Mother was a homemaker.

DUGAN: I expect you helped?

WERNER: Daddy had us busy; we were farm children. We had to gather the eggs in afternoon, we had to feed the chickens and we had to be sure that the cow was in the lot so Daddy could milk it. I milked the cow before I went to school, not a chore I loved. I didn't even love feeding the chickens. He had all of us doing things around the farm. We had a wood stove, so we had to be sure that there was wood in the wood box in the afternoon so Daddy could light the fire the next morning.

DUGAN: Do you remember the names of the families that lived near you?

WERNER: Well there weren't that many families near us. One family was Daddy's brother, John Blasdel. They had children, our cousins. I was close to that family. But as I grew up there were mostly Latin Americans on that side of the river. One family was named Reyes, Max Reyes and he did some sharecropping for Daddy, corn and different things like that. We always had stuff from the garden.

DUGAN: Let me ask you about race relations back then.

WERNER: Racial relations, well we had black people working for us. There was one black lady living on the place and she did washing and ironing for Mother. Then there was another black lady in town that came across the river and worked for mother.

She had nieces that lived with her and then when she didn't work anymore the nieces would. Burlie was one of them and she is in one of my pictures books. They stayed with us, goodness...until most of us were grown, they just continued to work for us, but they were good relations. We treated them right. They were willing to do anything we wanted.

DUGAN: So I guess your family did all their shopping and their business...

WERNER: In Richmond.

DUGAN: Tell me about Richmond in those days.

WERNER: Mother did all her shopping at E. Joseph's grocery store. I wish we had it today because Mother would sit down and make a list of what she wanted from the grocery stand... store, ten pounds of potatoes, or six cans of this or whatever she wanted, five pounds of sugars and she called Joseph's Grocery Store and read it to them. Within an hour or so this black man named Lonnie, would bring our groceries in the house and sit them on the kitchen table. How easy is that? (laughter). To have somebody do your grocery shopping for you. Now you have to go to the grocery store and fight the lines. That was a thing of the past.

DUGAN: What else do you remember?

WERNER: Morton Street was the main street. As I remember we all stayed in our own place. We had about seven families of Jewish people and they had grocery stores, a department store and didn't mingle with a lot of other people. They had Lee Ritche's grocery store. Some of the families were Smith, Melon, Lee Daily, Sam Rinkie, and Oshman. Pete Oshman had a Five and Dime Store and another Oshman had a dry goods store, where Mother bought some of her clothes. We had some people called Edelstein who had a clothing store for men and women. We had quite a number, I've got, nine different names written down here. They were all Jewish people that had stores there on that short two blocks of Richmond. They are not there now. I imagine those people stayed to themselves and probably went back into Houston to Synagogue because they never had a Jewish church out here. But they were all very nice; I was always amazed that we had so many Jewish families as merchants.

DUGAN: Interesting. What did your family do for entertainment?

WERNER: Well we didn't go anywhere. We didn't go to the movies we just stayed at home because we had chores to do, even in the evenings. We did not go to movies and we didn't come to town, except for church. We were always in church on Sunday. That was a big thing with Daddy. We must go to Sunday School and to church. So the church was our big entertainment, I guess. If anything went on at the church that's where we were, until we got into high school then we had other friends and there were bigger activities more interesting than farm work. So we took part in a lot of the school activities as we got older. But during the younger years we didn't have that much entertainment.

DUGAN: You mentioned a little bit about your schooling, can you talk more about that and maybe teachers names?

WERNER: One of my favorite teachers was in the sixth grade. Her name was Mrs. Bell and she was just a little short lady, she wasn't fat, but she was short...real short and wore her hair back in a bun. Everybody loved Miss Bell. In fact her house is still standing in Richmond now, over on Austin Street. It goes through what I call Freedman Town which you don't talk about anymore. That section of town where the colored people lived was called Freedman Town, north of the railroad tracks was Baptist Hill. That's where we had the two sections of black people. I don't know if we segregated them that way, but that's the way they were and I guess they didn't mix too much, because they were on two separate sides of the town. But I don't know of any animosity between them.

DUGAN: Did you go to college?

WERNER: Yes, I spent four years at Southwestern University in Georgetown Texas. That's where I met my husband.

DUGAN: Can you tell me more about your husband?

WERNER: He is a CPA. He grew up in Winslow Arizona and said he wanted to come a long ways from home. He didn't want to stay in Arizona, certainly not in Winslow, there is nothing there. Winslow was a railroad town and everybody that lived in Winslow worked on the railroad, because back in the thirties the railroads were big things.

Anyway, he came to Texas. I guess he might have been looking for a Methodist lady I am not sure. Cause he came to Southwestern University and that's where I met him. We dated for five years before we married because he was a year ahead of me and so he graduated a year ahead and he went into the military for two years. In the army and he spent a year in Nuremberg, Germany. When he came back we got married in 1955. He was the youngest of four boys. All of his other brothers were in the military too.

DUGAN: What led you to come back here then?

WERNER: I always wanted to live in Texas, even after we married. We married and went to A&M where he got his Masters, then he thought he wanted a Ph.D. We went to Illinois for about six months and he decided that's not what he wanted. He wanted to go ahead and be a C.P.A., and work in accounting. We came back to Texas and we lived in Houston until 1977 and then had a chance to move to Richmond. Mother and Daddy, still lived here. They celebrated their fifth anniversary in 1976.

DUGAN: Did they still live there at the end of the bridge?

WERNER: No they moved, down into what Daddy called part of his pasture. See Daddy was here during that 1913 flood of Richmond. All of Richmond was flooded and he said that one day he got into a boat and he road around and he found one spot down there on his property that was dry. He said that one day he would build himself a house there. So he did build a house there after all seven of us were gone and married. He then sold the house to us. He and Mother built a small house next door and we took care of them in their little house until they died.

We live in the big house now. The river has come up once since we have been there. In 1991 or 1992 the river did get way up. Because of the way it is you can see the river down there about a quarter of a mile, it will come in right behind our house. It didn't get to our house, because our house is up on a ridge. Because of the way that Daddy built the house on a ridge we can drive underneath it. My husband has his office down there on the lower level. If the river had gotten up any further it would have gotten into that bottom part of the house. He's Certified Public Accountant and works out of the house now. He's started out with Author Anderson and you know what happened to Author Anderson, it fell apart. He's by himself now.

DUGAN: Do you have any favorite or vivid memories of growing up here in this area?

WERNER: Well we had high school dances over here in the second story of City Hall. That was used as a place for the high school children to have school dances. Oh, we had a swimming pool. I didn't go swimming though because I don't like to swim.

DUGAN: Where was the swimming pool?

WERNER: Oh it was in the same block as the City Hall. The City Hall is on that corner and the swimming pool was on this other side to the back. I used to walk from the elementary school, where the nursing home is now. In the block just south of that is where the elementary school was. Jane Long Elementary, a big two story building. I have a picture of it. A big two story white brick building. In the afternoons I would walk from there to the post office, crossing the highway where there was red light beside the church and the courthouse. Daddy would be back from the mail route about two or three o'clock and I could ride home with him from school.

I would always go through Daily's Grocery Store, which was on the corner across from the church. They had probably a six-foot counter of nothing but penny candy. I was always excited to buy one of each with the pennies I had left from school lunch. I always went in there and bought my penny candy. What else do I remember about Richmond? It was just a nice little quiet place. The Rosenberg people thought we were a sleepy town. Somebody from Rosenberg told me that once. They would say on weekends when they would drive from Rosenberg to Houston through Richmond that we were a sleepy town.

DUGAN: Been a lot of changes in this area.

WERNER: Oh, many changes, many changes.

DUGAN: Think about the best changes and the worst changes.

WERNER: Oh goodness, the best changes. I didn't like it when they put another bridge across the river because I didn't want them to tear down the old bridge. They tore down the bridge that we had for two-way traffic. It was such a beautiful architectural bridge with the big ironwork. They blew it up, but it took many times to blow it up, so it was not as weak as they thought it was. They tried at least three times to blow that thing up.

DUGAN: Do you remember what year that was?

WERNER: I can't remember but I have a piece of it. I walked that bridge so many many times I decided that I wanted a part of it. My sister and I went down there one day while they were working and we told them that we needed some pieces of that bridge. It had a walkway on one side with a rail so you were protected when you walked across. It was in sections, about six feet sections of iron rail and I told the man that I would bake him cinnamon rolls if he would bring me seven of those. I wanted to give one to each of my brothers and sisters. One day this big rig truck drove up in the yard and he had all seven of those things, I don't remember what they did with them now, but I have still got one of them. They stand up about this tall because they had to be tall enough to protect you from falling in the river. He brought me all of them. So I have a piece of that bridge. These old iron bridges that have all this iron, well they just blew it to bits and then put up a plain bridge. I guess it helped Richmond in traffic maybe, but they could have thought ahead and put up a sign and said one-way traffic ahead because it was a narrow bridge. They could have one way going out and then have this other big fancy bridge over here that comes into Richmond.

DUGAN: Where was the old bridge?

WERNER: It's where the new one is. It looks kind of like the railroad bridge over here with all that ironwork. It was really a beautiful bridge; there was no need to tear it down. Another thing that's gone from Richmond is Jane Long's Boarding House. Now you are going to get me on my little box. When we moved back out here, in 1977 I discovered that Jane Long's Boarding House was gone. It stood right behind the post office, which is now part of Sandy McGee's. So everyday I walked from my school to the post office to ride home with Daddy. Here is this gorgeous Jane Long's Boarding House. Then I discover it's not there. I was on a bus one day and an adolescent was trying to tell these children what this house looked like. There is no way those children knew what that house looked like. Richmond had lost a bit of history that they didn't need to loose. That really disturbed me.

We had a preacher here at Saint John's; I am not going to mention any names. But he would have remodeled this Sanctuary to where you wouldn't have known it. I decided THIS is not going to happen. I raised my ugly head and really caused some ruffles. Ruffled a lot of feathers, but we have a State Marker on that building now and it can't be bothered (chuckle). I got the State Marker in 1982 or 1984. The Methodist Church gave us a marker because we are the oldest congregation. I think we are the second oldest in Texas, but we are the oldest in Fort Bend County for sure.

This church was organized in 1839 with a circuit rider that came here from Tennessee. Now I am working on a marker that will list this church on the National Registry of Historic Places. I am almost through with that. The architecture of that sanctuary is so beautiful outside and the inside. It should never be changed. We did change the inside of it in 1950 just a little bit but only to raise the window that's above the alter. We raised it up so that it could be seen better, that's the only real change we made in that sanctuary. As long as you don't move the four walls you can still get a marker. I was intent on them preserving a little bit of architecture.

DUGAN: Good for you.

WERNER: When you drive by it's a gorgeous church from the outside. Where do you see that kind of architecture anymore? I'm sure a lot of people could have tarred and feathered me and sent me out of town. I did get letters from the Pastor of Parish Relations suggesting that I might spend my time better.

DUGAN: (chuckles) That's all my questions, can you think of anything you would like to tell us about that I haven't mentioned?

WERNER: I don't know. Richmond is just a good place to be. It's close to Houston and you're close to good doctors and you're close to all of the fine arts. If you really want to go see the museums you can. This weekend they are having a fabulous quilt show in Houston. One of my sisters is there because she likes to quilt. She has been there since Wednesday.

I love Richmond, love Fort Bend County. It's got a lot of history. If you really want to understand the people, I think we are a different kind of people in Richmond, because we are a historic. We love history and to understand us people have to understand where we are coming from. Sometimes even the ministers have to understand where we are coming from. (chuckle). Because they come and want to make everything bigger than what it is. I think small, and I don't think on a big scale like a lot of the big churches do. Though our church has a lot of out-reach programs. You can get a lot of help here because people are caring, but our church is small.

Interview ends.