

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Benny Sbrusch**

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Interviewer: Karl Baumgartner

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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11 Pages



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*Transcript*

BAUMGARTNER: By way of introduction, Benny Sbrusch, like many members of the Fort Bend community, was born in a rural environment into a family of Czech heritage. He was raised during the Depression in an era which limited educational and vocational opportunity, and throughout his life he chose to make it on his own, taking the career path of an entrepreneur when there were fewer government regulations.

BAUMGARTNER: Benny, when and where were you born?

SBRUSCH: Beasley, Texas on March 17, 1931.

BAUMGARTNER: So you were a Great Depression baby, weren't you? That probably affected your whole life.

SBRUSCH: It has. You learned a little bit about hardship in those days.

BAUMGARTNER: And taking care of your money.

SBRUSCH: Well, I didn't have any money, but my folks were conservative in everything. Any money they had to spare, they were very careful with it.

BAUMGARTNER: Where were you born? At home or in a hospital?

SBRUSCH: At home.

BAUMGARTNER: Was there a midwife?

SBRUSCH: Yes. I can't remember her name but she was a neighbor who lived on our road, on Beasley West End Road.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you grow up in town or out in the country?

SBRUSCH: Out in the country. When my mother and family moved to town, they were getting older and I had gotten bigger and we moved to Rosenberg.

BAUMGARTNER: How long has your family been in Fort Bend County?

SBRUSCH: My grandparents, my father's father, Charlie Sbrusch, was born near Praha, Texas.

BAUMGARTNER: So he was born in Texas. Was he a farmer?

SBRUSCH: Yes. He had three kids that I remember. I didn't really know them well because we lived in Rosenberg and at that time there wasn't money to drive 70-80 miles very often. We went to Praha on August 15th every year and they had picnics. That was a big thing for us. It was a big family reunion.

BAUMGARTNER: Was your paternal grandmother from Praha or near there?

SBRUSCH: I don't know. I don't remember her first name.

BAUMGARTNER: So all your aunts and uncles and your family relatives lived near Praha and not near Beasley. What did your dad do?

SBRUSCH: He was a farmer too. He farmed cotton and corn here in Beasley, on West End Road.

BAUMGARTNER: Did he own his land or was he a tenant farmer?

SBRUSCH: He had two or three farms that he owned. He sold it to us or passed it on to us, as he got older. So we all accumulated a little land from him. My mother was really the breadwinner in the sense that she was smart and knew how to save money. My daddy was just a hard worker.

BAUMGARTNER: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

SBRUSCH: I had one sister and five brothers. I have a family picture here that I'd like to show you. One brother was killed in World War II. My little brother, Jimmy, died shortly after he was born. My oldest brother is Charlie and my sister is Lillie. This photo shows brother, Bill, Frank and me. I was probably 20 or 22 years old when this was taken.

BAUMGARTNER: What kind of things did you do when you were a kid, growing up?

SBRUSCH: We had a creek running through the property, Rabb Creek. All the water drained off that big lake that was up where Duval Sulphur used to be. We used to catch alligator gars up there and pretty good-sized catfish that we called mud cats. Yellow cats would have come out of the Brazos River. That lake was about 1,000 acres.

BAUMGARTNER: Was that before you started school?

SBRUSCH: It was way before I started school.

BAUMGARTNER: You were just a little boy. Where did you go to school?

SBRUSCH: Beasley. They had two schools. One was 1st grade to 5th or 6th grade and then they had a two-story building for high school.

BAUMGARTNER: Was the elementary school a one-room school for all the different grades?

SBRUSCH: Yes, it was for 1st to 5th or 6th.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you have one teacher for 1st to 5th?

SBRUSCH: No, we had different teachers. We probably had one teacher for two grades.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you have chores when you were a little boy?

SBRUSCH: Hell, you had chores from the God-damned time you were born! (both laugh). Fed the chickens, pulled grass in the garden, chopping around the plants. Everybody had chores in those days.

BAUMGARTNER: Was there a Catholic Church in Beasley then?

SBRUSCH: Oh yes.

BAUMGARTNER: How many of the people in Beasley in those days were Bohemians and Catholics?

SBRUSCH: Damn near all of them. My mother and aunt were big Catholics. Beasley had about four churches. The Catholics were the biggest beer drinkers.

BAUMGARTNER: You went to church every Sunday?

SBRUSCH: Yes. That was the thing to do.

BAUMGARTNER: When you moved to Rosenberg, did you go to Lamar Consolidated?

SBRUSCH: Yes.

BAUMGARTNER: How long were you there?

SBRUSCH: I quit in the 7th grade. I didn't go to school very long in Rosenberg because I got to be a bad boy in Rosenberg and my parents sent me back to Beasley to live with my brother Charlie.

BAUMGARTNER: How old was Charlie?

SBRUSCH: He was in his 40s.

BAUMGARTNER: How old were you when you went back to Beasley?

SBRUSCH: I had quit school and I helped him farm. We had land rented from the Fraziers in Richmond, on the Brazos River, and he kept me busy. He worked my ass off, really.

BAUMGARTNER: You must have been a wild young man!

SBRUSCH: Old man Frazier and them worked me over a little bit.

BAUMGARTNER: Discipline back then was a little bit different.

SBRUSCH: Oh, yes. They would spank your ass! That's the reason I'm a hard-ass today. (laughter)

BAUMGARTNER: What do you think some of the most important changes are now, the way society is, compared to the old days?

SBRUSCH: What I think is the parents aren't strict enough on their children. And the kids are a lot different, too. We didn't have the money to do what the kids do nowadays. I think that's where the difference is. Kids have too much freedom.

BAUMGARTNER: And social standards have relaxed a lot?

SBRUSCH: Yes. Divorce is three times as much or more. Of course there were no drugs back then. That was a benefit. People were still drinking beer and whiskey then. And making their own whiskey! My daddy used to make whiskey.

BAUMGARTNER: Out of what?

SBRUSCH: Corn. And wine out of grapes. He'd put fruit in baskets about that big around and make wine out of it.

BAUMGARTNER: He'd use those muscadine grapes that grew out in the fields? Those things don't taste very good.

SBRUSCH: They taste good in wine! It's a blue looking grape.

BAUMGARTNER: That bar that you built in Beasley - did people go in there and drink beer or whiskey?

SBRUSCH: Mostly beer. That's what was sold in there.

BAUMGARTNER: It's pretty interesting how so much can change in a person's lifetime. When you grew up on the farm, did you have indoor plumbing and running water?

SBRUSCH: No. We had a washroom away from the house where we took baths. We had a cistern that provided the water. In the summer, the water was warm and you could just take a shower. It had a cement floor. We had an outhouse. It didn't take long before we had toilets in the house and septic systems. When I was real little we had toilets outside.

BAUMGARTNER: Until I was three, we had an outhouse, back in Oklahoma. When did you get regular plumbing?

SBRUSCH: In the 1940s, things had already started changing.

BAUMGARTNER: When you were growing up, what were the relationships like with the different ethnic groups?

SBRUSCH: The blacks all lived across the tracks in Rosenberg, more or less. And Beasley had blacks but they were scattered in there.

BAUMGARTNER: Was there much interaction between the groups?

SBRUSCH: Not much at that time. The black people kind of stayed together; white people stayed together.

BAUMGARTNER: Was there any friction between them?

SBRUSCH: No.

BAUMGARTNER: What about the Hispanics?

SBRUSCH: Not that many. The Hispanics were scattered all over the place. They came out and worked on the farms. They were more conservative than most of the black people. They built little houses out in the country.

BAUMGARTNER: When did you get your first car?

SBRUSCH: Early in life, because I had quit school. I was selling newspapers in town, on the street corners, and then I got a job working for a Chevrolet place on Avenue G on this side of Rosenberg. I bought a 1949 Chevrolet. That was my new car. I was working for Knight Chevrolet. Robert McConnell, who was the shop foreman at the Ford Motor Company, knew me real well. I was making about \$35 a week at that time. Robert hired me.

BAUMGARTNER: Where was the Ford Motor Company?

SBRUSCH: Right on the highway in Rosenberg. We lived on Avenue H and the big, two story schoolhouse was directly across the street, with a football field and everything

BAUMGARTNER: What did Ford Motor Company do? They sold cars?

SBRUSCH: Yes. I think the name was Knipling and Junker. When I worked for the Ford Motor Company, I made \$10,000 a year. I did a little mechanic work but mostly was washing cars and keeping everything clean. That was good money then.

BAUMGARTNER: So you worked on the farm with your brother, you sold newspapers, then you worked for three car companies. Then what did you do?

SBRUSCH: Well, Bill Lucky was coach at Lamar. When I was working, selling dirt and different things, I got all the school's work from the Lamar School District.

BAUMGARTNER: But that was some time later after you got established. How did you start your own business?

SBRUSCH: When I left the car company, I went to work for J.D. Woods in Katy. He was a big rice farmer. I had been going up to his place and worked for my brother-in-law and hunted on Woods' ranch - hunted deer and stuff. Mr. Woods said he was looking for a hand.

Someone told him that maybe I'd work for him. I talked to him and I went for it. I worked for Mr. Woods and after two years was making \$10,500 a year. I got the biggest raise of my life! He had land in Francitas and in Monroe, Louisiana. I started taking care of all the farms and helping him run the whole show. I told him I needed a raise, and he said he thought I deserved a raise. He asked how much I wanted. I told him I thought I was worth \$50,000 a year. And he gave me that raise! I knew how much work I was doing for him and what I was making for him. I figured I needed to get paid for all that work. We harvested \$500,000 worth of rice a year, I needed to get my share of that.

BAUMGARTNER: When was that? You were married then, right?

SBRUSCH: Oh yes.

BAUMGARTNER: How old were your kids then? That must have been in the 1960's?

SBRUSCH: They weren't very old. The oldest was about ten. I was probably 35 years old. I've still got family here in town. My daughter Sandy just retired from Lamar ISD. She married Richard Guidry and they've got three sons. Jason, Grant, and Blake. They're doing great! Those boys are going to make more money than I ever did! And I've got greatgrandchildren too.

BAUMGARTNER: Hey that's great! Eventually you left Mr. Woods and went out on your own?

SBRUSCH: Yes.

BAUMGARTNER: When did you do that and why did you want to leave?

SBRUSCH: Well, I don't know. I just wanted to go on my own, I guess. I was making a lot of damn money and I was already set up. I owned farms and things. Land was selling for \$200-\$300 an acre so I was buying and selling land. I started making \$100,000 a lick when I did that. So that's how I got started.

BAUMGARTNER: That's a LOT of money back in those days in Fort Bend County. Didn't you also build some commercial business?

SBRUSCH: I built a bar in Beasley, built it to rent. Eddie Walzel had a grocery store there and I bought some lots between his store and the gin. I built a service station - I didn't run it, just built it. It was a service station and beer joint combined. I just kept growing my business. Later built two commercial buildings on FM 723 north of Rosenberg. And I put my money in real estate.

BAUMGARTNER: What kinds of property did you buy?

SBRUSCH: It was all farmland and pastureland. Any time I ran across a good deal, I bought it. I had land in Wharton and several places.

BAUMGARTNER: What size properties did you buy?

SBRUSCH: The biggest was about 100 acres.



BAUMGARTNER: Then you would flip them?

SBRUSCH: Yes. I bought some land on the Brazos River. My dad had some land there. I bought 40 or 50 acres of land from him. Then I bought my brother's land and I ended up with about 100+ acres. It ran against the river and all the way up against the Moore property, near Orchard.

BAUMGARTNER: Where it bumped up against the big Moore property?

SBRUSCH: Mine didn't bump up all the way but I had that land and I bought some more. I bought 17 acres with a house on it over there that I rented out. Then I got 75 more acres, just land. Land was first running \$50 an acre when I started. Dr. Denton Cooley, the Houston heart surgeon, came up and wanted my land. So I ended up selling all my land for a couple hundred thousand dollars to him. He bought land all along Long Drive all the way against what Hilmar Moore owned. He owned thousands of acres that ran almost all the way to Rosenberg. So Dr. Cooley's purchase gave me a good nest egg.

BAUMGARTNER: When did you buy your truck and start in the gravel business?

SBRUSCH: That started in the late 1970's I think. Bill Lucky was a coach and he had two or three boys who played football. He coached at Lamar. When I was working, selling dirt and different things, I got all the school's work from the Lamar School District. I made a lot of money there.

BAUMGARTNER: Wasn't Coach Lucky the Athletic Director?

SBRUSCH: Yes, he was over the football field and things like that. His main job was over the school. The school was right on the highway, on Avenue H, and the football field ran all the way down it. All that's gone now.

BAUMGARTNER: So you got in the gravel business. What did you do in the gravel business?

SBRUSCH: There was gravel on the banks of the Brazos River, right there in town almost. I had a lumberyard by then on Highway 36. Home Lumber Company was on Highway 90 and they had another one on Highway 36.

BAUMGARTNER: When did you start your lumberyard?

SBRUSCH: I was already into my 40s.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you buy that when you got the money from Dr. Cooley?

SBRUSCH: No, some land came up right where my mother lived then. My mother had started investing and had bought seven rent houses in Rosenberg.

BAUMGARTNER: Was your dad still living then?

SBRUSCH: Yes. But Mama was the business lady. Daddy never earned much. He was a farmer and a hard worker. But she knew how to make that money.

BAUMGARTNER: That's probably where you got your instincts.

SBRUSCH: Do you know what houses were renting for then? They were renting houses for just about \$35-\$45 a month at that time!

BAUMGARTNER: People don't realize how inflation has changed things.

SBRUSCH: Anyway, I made good money when I started working for the school. Bill Lucky was the main man at the school at that time and he was also building houses. That's how I got tied in with Bill Lucky. I sold him dirt from my operation on the Brazos River and that led into selling the dirt to the School District. That was a good business.

BAUMGARTNER: Where did you get your dirt?

SBRUSCH: In Rosenberg, you take FM 723 going north toward Fulshear, cross the railroad tracks, cross over the river, turn on the first road to the left. Baker Road. About a quarter of a mile from there, the road makes a 90-degree turn and that's where I bought that land. It was about 30-40 acres of river property with a huge sand bar where the Brazos makes a bend. I opened that up and started hauling dirt, back across the river into Rosenberg. It was right there next to town so it was close. I started with one dump truck and added two more trucks later. I could sell 1,000 or so loads off of that sandbar. When there would be a 30foot river rise, it would bring all that new dirt to me.

BAUMGARTNER: So you kept getting all your inventory for free!

SBRUSCH: I never had to buy inventory because of the river coming up. Everything was profit. You start making \$45-\$50 a load of dirt, and my distance of hauling was so short, my fuel costs weren't much. Hell, at that time you'd make \$300-\$400 a day, you were making some money! And we'd get a river rise about every two years and it would bring me all that free sand back.

BAUMGARTNER: What a deal! Why didn't more people try that? Was there much government regulation then?

SBRUSCH: No.

BAUMGARTNER: Now don't they regulate the gravel pits pretty hard?

SBRUSCH: Yes. They limit where they can be built, too.

BAUMGARTNER: Who did you buy that land from? Most people wouldn't think it was very valuable because it was pretty low, subject to flooding.

SBRUSCH: I don't remember. I probably didn't pay \$50 an acre for it, it was in the flood zone. At \$45-\$50 a load for dirt it didn't take long for it to pay for itself. I used some of the profit to build a nice home there on the river, elevated it up on pilings so the flood couldn't reach the main floor.

BAUMGARTNER: But now there is a lot of regulation.

SBRUSCH: Yeah. You can't do ##### now. Too many restrictions. You have to pay for every damn thing.

BAUMGARTNER: It's unbelievable how much things have changed as far as government regulation is concerned. You grew up in a pretty good era.

SBRUSCH: Right at the right time.

BAUMGARTNER: I tell people that we grew up in such a fortunate era compared to now. Benny I always enjoyed talking to you when I saw you around town and I've enjoyed talking to you here. You've done good. Thank you for your time.

SBRUSCH: I've enjoyed it too.

Interviews ends.