

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Charles A. (Pete) Coburn, Jr.**

Interview Date: 06/24/2011

Interviewer: Pat Pollicoff

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: Riverbend Country Club, Sugar Land, Texas

10 Pages



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Transcript

POLLICOFF: Pete, when and where were you born?

COBURN: I was born on February 12, 1933, at Laura Eldridge Hospital. My dad's name was Charles A. Coburn, Senior, and my mother was Mary Coburn. She worked at the refinery at some point in her life. My father came here from Huntsville, Texas. He worked at the dairy for a long time and then got a chance to work on a ranch, and we moved to Brooks Street for a short period. He was ranch foreman and then we finally moved out to a ranch on Highway 6. Frost bought that ranch at a later date. But that's where I was raised until we moved back into Sugar Land, where the Fluor Daniel building is. Dad was still the ranch foreman. We lived in an old farmhouse there, and then they built us another farm house.

POLLICOFF: Were all these homes provided by Sugarland Industries?

COBURN: Oh, yeah.

POLLICOFF: Tell me a little bit about your family.

COBURN: I had one brother, Albert, who went into the Navy when he was 17 years old. I was about 9 years old then. Then he went into the Marine Corps. So, he was in World War II. When he got out, he went back to high school, got his diploma, and then went to work for Exxon. I was still in high school and we were beginning to have a football team that was worthwhile. I tell people that the first time I got to play football and go on a trip, we went over to Katy, Texas, and they fed us chicken fried steak. That's when I knew I was going to stay on that football team!

POLLICOFF: When were you a senior?

COBURN: I graduated in 1952, but my football season was in 1951. Up until that time, you could count the people in the stands. But in my junior year, we won over half our games. Mr. White came in and saw an opportunity to take advantage of some speed and talent we had in the freshman class. So, they moved Kenneth Hall up to the varsity and I don't think we lost any more games that year.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the Kenneth Hall's interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=40325>

POLLICOFF: I understand Kenneth was a reluctant football player. He liked the band. Were you in the band?

COBURN: We were really close friends in high school. I was in the band for a while until I went out for football.

POLLICOFF: It was that chicken fried steak that won you over!

COBURN: Yes, it sure was! (chuckles).

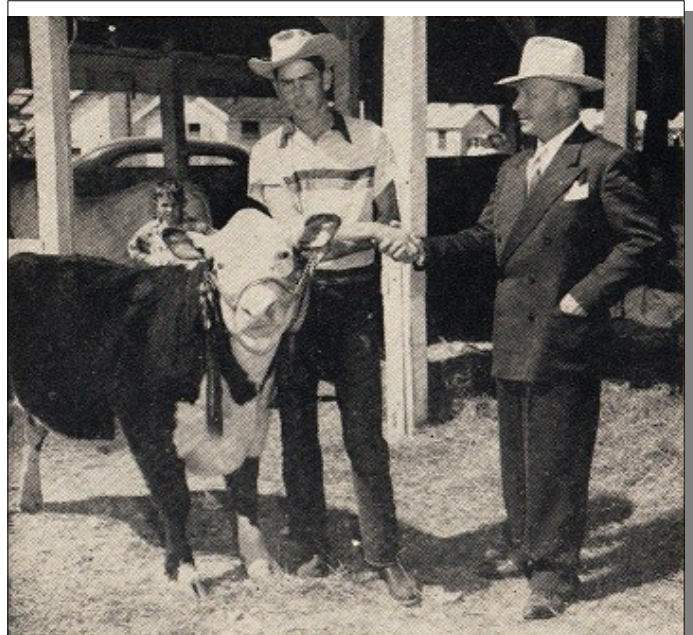
Kenneth was a real asset. Along with Kenneth, a boy named George Salmon who came out of Houston, was also on the team. We had a lot of speed and talent during the latter part of my junior year. Kenneth was a freshman, and George and I were juniors that year. When Mr. White came here, you played all sports if you could play any. Mr. White was a great person. His attitude and approach to sportsmanship probably had as much to do with making us a successful team as anything.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read Carlos Bennett Tarver's interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=30480>

POLLICOFF: Did you do any other extra-curricular activities?

COBURN: I lived on a ranch! I won Reserve Champion calf one year and Grand Champion calf at the Fort Bend County Fair. I raised calves my freshman, sophomore and junior years. I didn't raise a calf my senior year. I was real fortunate, but you have to understand that my dad was a ranch foreman. He had a chance to help me pick out some calves. The FFA group had a good program in Rosenberg. They helped us kids raise animals and develop showmanship. It wasn't something I did alone. We had a lot of help from the 4H Club.

POLLICOFF: Can you describe what it was like, growing up in Sugar Land.



Fort Bend County Fair president W. K. "Boots" Helmcamp congratulates Charles Coburn on raising the Grand Champion Calf for the 1950 county fair. courtesy Helmcamp family

COBURN: It was great! Before high school, we had to figure out a way to get to school. I lived about a mile and a half out. Sometimes it was so muddy we had to take a wagon into town to go to school. In my freshman year, I didn't have a car, I had a motorbike and that's what I went back and forth to school with. I was still raising calves and I had to get home every day after football practice to feed those calves and take care of them. It's not so much about what I did. It was a good opportunity to get out in the country and be with your family.

POLLICOFF: Were there other families that your family was close to?

COBURN: Not particularly. Sugar Land was scattered. I was close to George Salmon. They lived out at The Humble Camp. And I was close to Eugene Deblaw and some of the people with Humble. Everybody played ball. You ran track, you played basketball, and you played football and didn't know there was anything else.

Mr. White taught us a lot of things including sportsmanship. Kenneth Hall was a real asset because of his speed and size. We won the championship.

POLLICOFF: He was one player. He was outstanding, no doubt. But I understand it was the whole team.

COBURN: It was a method of football that Mr. White brought with him. It was a lot of team effort; there was the blocking from the guards and the wing backs and the short backs. A lot of those plays were designed to give support to Kenneth. J. B. Kachinski was also a good running back. Most of them had pretty good speed.



Sugar Land High School Gator track team, Spring 1952. Front kneeling from left: J. B. Kachinski, Ernest Trevino, Pete Coburn. Standing from left: Kenneth Hall, Tommy Fatheree, John Boyd (behind Fatheree), Leo Gomez (hand raised), unknown boy, Mickey Kachinski (?), Bo Vogelsang, Carlos Tarver, George Salmon. --<http://wateringholdclubhouse.blogspot.com>

POLLICOFF: What was your position?

COBURN: I played wing back. About the only time I got the ball was when they had an end-around or wing back around. Most of the time I received passes. Most of the jobs for the wing backs and the guards were pulling and blocking so Kenneth or J. B. could run through the hole. We had some fast ends, like George Salmon. He was a real asset to us and a threat.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read Ron Miller's interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=42755>

About the time they pinned us down on Kenneth – I think the only game he missed was the Missouri City game my senior year and they tied us – but when you took Kenneth out, you took a lot of the surprise elements out because of his speed and size. We just took it for granted that it was a team effort. I don't think we ever gave any thought to the fact that one particular person was any better than the other, but we all worked to



Missouri City High School championship basketball team, 1950. Left, Coach Lawrence Elkins, 17 Glenn Johec, 21 Bobby Williams, 20 Bobby Davis, 18 Alfred Renfrow, 13 Charles Court, 19 Andrew George, 16 Louis Rychlick, 12 Donald Jordy, 14 Donald Cothorn, 15 Eugene Dinges. --<http://wateringholdclubhouse.blogspot.com>

make sure that the team was successful by following our blocking assignments. I had the good fortune to call the signals my junior and senior year, but they were basically a directive from Mr. White. There were some particular plays you called in sequence.

POLLICOFF: Was there a specific moment or game or event that stands out in your mind as your favorite?

COBURN: I remember we played Orchard my senior year. They played a real good ball game and taunted us about newspaper clippings. We came out and beat them real bad the last half. They had a good team. Later on, there was a guy named Dzierzanowski who came to Sugar Land and coached here. I played against his brother, Bruno. He was compared to Kenneth Hall as a running back but he didn't have quite the passing talent or as much speed. He was a good ball player. I remember McElroy of Katy. People used to say "Well, y'all played them 'B' schools." I said, "Well, Deer Park was a 'B' school at that time and we played them. We played Magnolia and Tomball who were also 'B' schools. I think we were just the best during that period."

POLLICOFF: Clearly there were other extra-curricular activities because you met somebody.

COBURN: Oh, yes. She was a cheerleader. She came here when she was about 13. I've known her since she was 13. We've been married 56 years.

POLLICOFF: Did you know right away that she was the special one?

COBURN: No. She went with a few other guys. But by my junior/senior year, we started going steady.

POLLICOFF: When did you get married?

COBURN: I got drafted during Korea and was fortunate enough not to have to go and get killed. In my junior year we got engaged. Her dad was a barber and started cutting my hair for free. I said I wished I had known that my sophomore year! We've not had a cakewalk in our lives, with some of our illnesses, but we've been real fortunate to have each other and each other's support.

POLLICOFF: Did you stay in Sugar Land?

COBURN: No, I didn't. I was drafted. Jobs were hard to find and when you came back from service, everybody was looking for a job. My brother-in-law got me a job with the City of Bellaire Fire Department. I stayed with them for about 4-1/2 years. For medical reasons, I had a real need to try to get some different coverage, and my fire chief got me a job at Goodyear Chemical.

I went to work in Safety and Fire Prevention at Goodyear and stayed there until 1961. Then went to Monsanto Chemical in Chocolate Bayou on the south side of Alvin. I stayed there until 1985 and then had one of those handshakes. I didn't know that I was ready to leave but it sounded like it was time to leave.

All through these 15-16 years, I went to A & M Fire School Training and went to the corporate school for Monsanto. In 1985, I took the incentive to leave and went to A & M and stayed there two years. I taught fire school at their training school, and then I went to Sterling Chemicals in 1987, and I stayed there until 1998, when I retired. We lived in Alvin from 1961 to 1992. I was also on the Volunteer Fire Department for Alvin for a long time. Then we moved to Hillcrest Village and lived there for 19 years, and that's where we are right now.

POLLICOFF: Tell me about your kids.

COBURN: My daughter's a registered nurse and she's done real well. She's also a Stephen's Minister for the Methodist Church in Clear Lake. Her name is Vivi Lynn. She was born in 1956. She's my soul mate. She's lots of help for us. She's there for me when I need her. I have a son Charles A. Coburn, III (Chad), who went to Southwest. He was born in 1961. We didn't have a baby when we got married, but we had one as soon as we could.

POLLICOFF: You got married in 1955 in Sugar Land?

COBURN: We got married in Rosenberg, Texas, at the Catholic Church. She's a Catholic and I was a Baptist. We went to the Catholic Church for years. I couldn't go to communion so when we moved to the Alvin area, we switched over to the Methodist Church.

POLLICOFF: You went from high school straight into the service and then you went to school at A & M for fire training. Did you complete a four-year degree program?

COBURN: No, never did.

POLLICOFF: Did many of your classmates do that, or did most of them go straight into the service?

COBURN: George Salmon went to Rice on a track scholarship. B. I. Webb is one of my best friends. We were hunting buddies. That's another thing we did a lot. I lived out on a ranch and we had a lot of farmland. Even after we got married, we were friends with Kenneth and Gloria until they moved out to Fredericksburg. His daddy was the constable in Sugar Land. So, his daddy was watching out for us in town and my daddy out there on the ranch, so you couldn't do much wrong.

You'd have thought I was in the cattle business instead of fire protection all my life. I did raise a few cows when I was at Monsanto. We just didn't have the money to do it.

POLLICOFF: You said your mother worked for the refinery. What did she do?

COBURN: She worked in the refinery in the packing department. Most of the women worked up there where they weighed the five-pound boxes. Her name was Mary Elizabeth Coburn. My mother retired from Imperial. Most of the people who lived in those houses worked for Sugarland Industries or Imperial.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read George B. I. Webb's interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=48878>

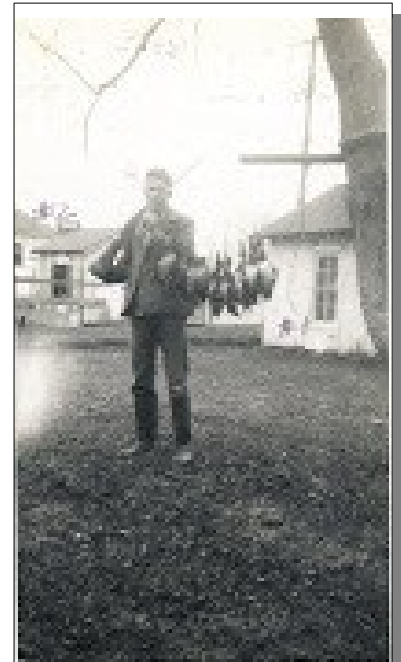
POLLICOFF: So most of your classmates worked for the refinery or for Sugarland Industries?

COBURN: I don't think that many of them actually ended up back in the refinery. They went to college and went to other things. J. B. went into the jewelry business. You're only talking about 20 people in my senior class.

POLLICOFF: So most of them went on the college?

COBURN: A big part of them did, I think. Or went into the service and some of them stayed in the service.

POLLICOFF: How many of them would you say actually came back to live and/or work in Sugar Land afterwards?



Pete Coburn in B. I. Webb's backyard with a day's catch of ducks, ca. 1952.

COBURN: Most of them went to college, got their degrees and took other avenues. I don't think that many people came back to Sugar Land. I didn't go back to Sugar Land because the pay was real low. But it wasn't much lower than the Fire Department!

POLLICOFF: Did your parents and your brother stay here?

COBURN: After my brother got his high school diploma, he went to work for Exxon when he came out of the service. Long story short, my brother and his wife ended up over at Bethel First Christian Girls Home for over twenty years. He lived until he was 69 years old and then went to be with the Lord.

POLLICOFF: He was the wild one?

COBURN: Yeah. He liked to have a good time and was a little reckless, I guess.

POLLICOFF: Your daughter has children?

COBURN: Yes, she has one boy, Nick Skeen, and one girl, Brook Skeen. My son has three girls and one of his daughters (Kelsey) has a golf scholarship at Southwestern University. The other two are twins and are juniors in Corpus Christi. The twins' names are Cora and Keeley. They are 5' 10" tall, and they all play golf.

Nick, Vivi's son, got his degree from the University of Houston and the only place he could find a job was in Kansas. So, he went to work for an air conditioning company there and ended up back as a manager for Cooper Air Conditioning in Corpus Christi. So, we're kind of scattered around, but the kids have done pretty well.

POLLICOFF: What have I forgotten to ask you?

COBURN: All I can tell you about the football team in Sugar Land was it was a team effort, and I don't think we ever gave any thought to who was the best player. We have to acknowledge that Kenneth DID make a big difference in our football team because we didn't win any games my sophomore year and we won about half of them my junior year.

We won all but one my senior year. That was the tie with Missouri City, and it was because Kenneth got hurt on the first play. I said they would need to hurt him if they wanted to beat us because there's no telling how many points he would have scored if they didn't pull him out at the half.

POLLICOFF: I understand that to be good sportsmen they often pulled him out when the score was pretty high.

COBURN: That's right. I don't think we were trying to set any records. We didn't know what the other records were. We ended up in Sports Illustrated magazine. Sugar Land did turn out real well for the size it was.

POLLICOFF: Looking back, what is your favorite memory of this place?

COBURN: Being raised on a ranch, having brothers and sisters and mother and daddy. That's the best thing. And to have the opportunity to play the sports that we were able to play. There was not a gentler man than my dad.

POLLICOFF: I want to ask one other thing. I know how everybody talks about Ken Hall had the ball. But even though he was a great athlete, he was still just an everyday guy?

COBURN: He was just an everyday guy. The methods Mr. White used teaching us how to block and tackle, helped Kenneth. If you could get Kenneth loose back there, and get the linebacker out of the way, he could usually run. I was about the slowest one in the backfield. I could run the 100 in 11 flat and everybody else was faster than that! Kenneth was down in the 9s, George Salmons could run it in 10 flat, and J. B. was about 10:04.

POLLICOFF: Was that because of working on the ranch?

COBURN: No, not really. We had another guy that probably doesn't get mentioned a whole lot, who was real good and helped Ken out, named Tom Fatheree. He did really well at Baylor. He was also a real asset for Kenneth. He came in behind the other ends like George Salmon, who had graduated. Tom wasn't as fast, but he was a good end. We just had lots of talent, natural talent.

Maybe it was because a lot of people lived on farms or ranches. J. B. lived out in the country. I think we just took Sugar Land for granted and didn't realize what a wonderful place it was to be raised.

POLLICOFF: I think you DO realize it because every one of you has said how special it was.

Interview ends