

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Clara Browning**

Interview Date: 09/12/2015

Interviewer: Bill Duggan

Transcriber: Olga Barr

Location: City Hall, Simonton, Texas

7 Pages



This oral history is copyrighted 2017, by the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. All Rights Reserved. For information contact: Fort Bend County Historical Commission, Attn: Chairman-Oral History Committee, 301 Jackson St., Richmond, TX, 77469.

Terms and Conditions

This file may not be modified or changed in any way without the express written permission of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission.

This file may not be redistributed for profit.

Please do not 'hot link' to this file.

Please do not repost this file.



Transcript

DUGGAN: Mrs. Browning, you came to the Fort Bend County area in the mid 1950s. Will you tell us about when you came here and why?

BROWNING: My husband, Earl Browning, transferred to a job in Houston. We lived in West University for three years before moving to Simonton. The reason we moved out here was that a new subdivision named Valley Lodge was being developed, and he was the sales manager. He started working with the developers, Bailey and Evans, in 1957 probably about March or April getting the property ready for sales. We decided it was a long drive from West University for him to come out here every day, so we decided to build a house out here. We built a house and moved out here in November of 1958. I still reside in the same house.

DUGGAN: Tell me what Simonton was like at the time.

BROWNING: Simonton was a dot on the map (chuckles). We had a grocery store where there still is a store, but it is run by different people. It was Berkman's Grocery Store then. [See Maurice Berkman interview] We had a filling station that also had a little café, drinking place connected with it. The big cotton gin was right across from Berkman's store. There was a church where the present Simonton Community Church is now. But it was not being used because it had kind of become inactive. So we had the church. We had a blacksmith's shop, and the store, and a little gas station, and not much else!

DUGGAN: Where did you go for shopping or go to church?

BROWNING: Well, Berkman's Store carried everything. You could buy a pair of rubber boots in there, jeans, groceries or fresh produce. Mr. Berkman would go to Houston on a certain day of the week or maybe a couple of times a week to pick up things. You could even occasionally find an article of clothing that you might want other than jeans. It had a fresh meat market. We never had any frozen foods then. It was a nice store. It was right there in the center of town. They charged your groceries and sent you a bill once a month.

DUGGAN: Neat. So for entertainment?

BROWNING: The only entertainment in town was when the Valley Lodge Club opened. The Valley Lodge Clubhouse opened in, I think probably January of 1958. It had a wonderful dining room, a bar area, and it was full of people every week after some lots were sold. People enjoyed driving out to the country and spending two or three hours, having a good meal, and visiting with other people.

I want to show you a picture of what Valley Lodge looked like at that time. This is what we called our old town. This was my husband's sales office. This is an old hotel from Houston, and it is now over in Richmond. We had a whole string of old buildings. They are all gone now.

DUGGAN: Were you one of the first residents there in Valley Lodge?

BROWNING: Yes. When we moved here in November of 1958, we had three

children, ages nine, three, and one-and-a-half years. We were the only people that lived out here full-time. There were people that built houses and came out on the weekend or came out whenever they wanted to. We had stables. I don't recall how many stalls there were, probably 15 or something like that. People came out on the weekends to ride their horses, visit with friends. We had a swimming pool. The clubhouse building is still there. It is no longer a clubhouse. It is owned by some horse people. There was lots for the kids to do. There was what they called a pitch and putt golf course. It was only three holes right in the area around the clubhouse. There were a couple of lakes. People would fish. We had a paddle boat. Kids would ride out to a little island out there. People could bring kids out to the country and turn them loose and let them enjoy themselves.

At least once a month we would have dances and a live band at the clubhouse. There may be only five or six pieces, but there were live people performing there. It was a lot of fun. We would have square dancing lessons. There were programs. There were special events going on. They had dances for the holidays which were very well attended. A lot of important people from Houston bought lots. They brought their friends. The dining room would be full, the bar, and the swimming pool. On Saturdays and Sundays, it was always fun.

DUGGAN: Is it still mostly weekenders that come there or they people...?

BROWNING: Oh, no. I don't know what our Valley Lodge population is anymore. I used to keep up with all that when...well, my husband worked with the original developers.

DUGGAN: Tell me his name again.



Valley Lodge Sales Office, circa 1958

BROWNING: My husband, Earl. We had Browning Realty Company in Rosenberg for about 20 years. This was after he worked for Valley Lodge from 1957 until about 1960 probably. He was the sales manager. On weekends sometimes he would have four or five salesmen. People really just flocked out here from Houston. There are not too many of them that have been out here as long as I have. When we moved here there were some people who had weekend houses, but didn't live here full time. A lot of them lived here until they died. Everybody loves it out here. We had a couple of those big Percheron horses. I think they had two teams and some big wagons. They would take the kids for a ride and there was a park up this way that had a circle that went around the park. We had this man that drove the big wagon where he sat way up high. You had quite a little climb to get up there.

DUGGAN: Is there a road out there that's named after your husband?

BROWNING: Not out here. He worked at Valley Lodge as sales manager until about 1960. Most of the lots were sold, and it could no longer be a full-time job for him with a family to raise, too. So he opened his office in Houston. But we still loved Valley Lodge and never wanted to move and continued to live there. He had offices in Houston. Then about 1970 he moved to Rosenberg. So we had offices in Rosenberg until he died in 1989.

He sold many properties in Rosenberg. The one he was most proud of was the Frito-Lay plant. He sold that property to Frito-Lay and worked quietly on it for a long time before it closed. When Frito-Lay opened, Highway 36 going through Rosenberg was just two lanes and people parked all the way down 36. It's hard to imagine now, but they did. Whenever there would be a need for evacuation from the south it was REALLY difficult with all that extra traffic. When Frito-Lay got going they had a lot of big trucks that needed to get to Highway 90. Going through Rosenberg or Richmond wasn't going to work too well and getting to 59 was difficult for big trucks. So he and the top man from Frito-Lay worked on it.

My husband went to all the landowners. He met with TXDOT (Texas Department of Transportation). They laid out what would be an approximate route; we called it a bypass. They call it Memorial Highway now. Earl went to all the landowners and was able to get an easement donated. It was nearly what they had envisioned. He worked on that for a long time. He was never a paid employee. He just did this because he saw the need for it and he wanted to help the town. So they had it all set up.

But in the 1980s the economy took a downturn and TXDOT (Texas Department of Transportation) had to move everything off of their five-year plan onto a ten-year plan. The way the donations of the land were set up were for tax purposes. When you donate it has to be done before a certain time or it is null and void. Well that's what happened. So when the economy perked up a little bit some of those same landowners wouldn't donate again. They said, "No, it fell through last time. I'm not going to do that again." But they did get a route. It varies just a little but it is a wonderful route. In the meantime, Earl died so he didn't get to see it. But it is there. I am very proud of that.

DUGGAN: Tell me about the changes in Valley Lodge since it started.

BROWNING: Well, when we started out, it was a very friendly atmosphere because of everybody coming out from Houston. We had some of the movers and shakers of Houston at that time. They brought their friends. It was just a good, fun, friendly atmosphere. In my estimation, we've never lost that. Even though it is entirely different people now. People had horses at that time. Very few people played golf because a real golfer doesn't want to play on three holes. But people would just go out there to have fun. Later when the original developers sold to somebody else and then to somebody else, they did put in a nine-hole golf course. Then they put in an 18-hole golf course. In that transition, we lost the horse people. Now there are horses all over. I mean we have some avid horse people there now.

DUGGAN: So they came back.

BROWNING: Well, not the same people, but different people. I didn't realize there were so many people that were so interested in horses. That's a friendly group. In my estimation everything hasn't changed much since the original friendly, fun place.

DUGGAN: You don't have this old-time town down there anymore [looking at a post card].

BROWNING: No! From '57 to '60 somewhere in here, we probably didn't have these. One building was some old hotel moved in from Houston. There was also a little jail that had a chain and ring in the floor. It was supposed to come from somewhere over around Sealy. We had a log cabin, two rooms with a dog trot in the middle. We had furniture in there.



Valley Lodge "Old Town" circa 1958

That was interesting for people to come and roam around through those buildings. This was a blacksmith shop. They found old buildings some place and moved them in. We've gotten better roads. The town got incorporated. That's been a change. I don't remember just what year that was.

DUGGAN: Is Valley Lodge part of the city limits now?

BROWNING: Yes, big part of it. We used to have around 200 people.

DUGGAN: You have another picture there. Tell me about that.

BROWNING: That's how I used to look. I was on the grand jury. I don't remember what year, maybe 1997. That is John Healy. That's Elliott, isn't it? This was our sheriff, Tiny Gaston. He wasn't tiny, but that was Tiny. This is Richards. He is Justice of the Peace I think.

This man was in the Archeological Society. He would go on those digs. We had one between Simonton and Weston Lakes, right down on Poole Hill Road. He told me about it, and I went down there. They didn't advertise it. It was on somebody's land back there. It was an old Indian settlement or something. He told me, "Clara, this is only going to be here another a couple of weeks and it is going to be closed up because something else is going to be done with the land." So I went down there. That was the first time and only time I'd ever been to one of those digs. They were sifting all the dirt and sectioning it off. There were Indian skeletons they found in there. I never did hear what happened. But I saw them in there! They had this all dug out. The ones that I saw were buried like in layers! They were on top of each other.

My husband was on the Lamar School District Board after our children were all out of school. It was a long bus ride from here to Lamar, which was the only high school. The junior high was right there. The grade schools were scattered around. Some people wanted them to build a school over this direction so our children wouldn't have to ride so far. Or they could try to switch us to Orchard and Wallis, which would be closer. Orchard didn't have a high school. Wallis had a high school. So when school board had its next election Earl ran and he won! There were four other people that ran at the same time. But he won. So in 1980 Huggins school in Fulshear, Foster High School, and George Junior High were built. But we had one in Fulshear. It was only a grade school. It was up through sixth grade at that time.

DUGGAN: That's Huggins?

BROWNING: Huggins. Earl was good friends with Ed Huggins. He was a big landowner in the Fulshear area. Ed had been president of the school board for a good long time, and was very, very well thought of. He was not on the school board when Earl was. He had retired, and they had moved to Junction but he still owned property here. So Mr. Huggins donated the 20 acres to build the school on down there. Earl was on the school board and had something to do with him donating that land or at least putting the idea in his head.

There is a process to go through to name schools. There is a certain criteria. Everybody had to be dead before they got anything named after them. But Earl said, "How can you even be thinking about naming that school anything except Huggins after the man gave you the land?" So they did.



Huggins Elementary School, Fulshear, Texas

Earl put his heart and soul into Valley Lodge and it turned out well. Then he put his heart and soul into working for the local area. He was in the Chamber of Commerce, the Lions Club, the Rotary Club; every service organization. Then he worked getting the bypass through. We do not have any Texas roots but once we got here we contributed and we never left. We came here from Chicago, although I was born in Ohio and he was born in Kentucky. We married and moved to Chicago where he was in school. Then we moved to Houston, Texas and then to Simonton and that's it! He did a lot of good! He did a lot of good!

DUGGAN: I agree.

Interview ends