

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Clara Henrietta Narramore**

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Interviewer: Roberta Terrell

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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11 Pages



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Transcript

TERRELL: Where were you born, Clara?

NARRAMORE: In Washington County, in Gay Hill, on September 16, 1913.

TERRELL: What were your parents' names?

NARRAMORE: My mother was Emma Rust, and my father was Charlie Wendt.

TERRELL: What brought your parents to Fort Bend County?

NARRAMORE: We were farming up there. The land was so poor we couldn't make a living anymore. Mama was sick a lot so, my aunt and I moved in with them so I could take care of her.

TERRELL: What did your father do?

NARRAMORE: He farmed cotton and corn.

TERRELL: Did you have brothers and sisters?

NARRAMORE: I had one brother, Edwin Wendt, and one sister, Olga Wendt. She married a Roessler.

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Delbert Wendt's interview on the FBC Historical Commission website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=42956>
Clara's brother, Edwin, was Delbert's father and he mentioned her in his interview.

TERRELL: Were you born in a hospital or at home?

NARRAMORE: I know it wasn't at a hospital.

TERRELL: Do you know if there was a midwife or a doctor present?

NARRAMORE: I don't know. I had a midwife when I had my daughter. She was born at home with Dr. Ben Kanaly from Brenham. I only have one daughter, Florence Loesch. That was my first husband's name, Edwin Loesch. He passed away early.

TERRELL: You grew up on the farm?

NARRAMORE: Yes.

TERRELL: What did you do for entertainment?

NARRAMORE: Played hide and go seek. Nothing special.

TERRELL: Did you work on the farm?

NARRAMORE: Oh, yes. I chopped cotton and corn, and picked cotton.

TERRELL: What do you remember about living in the county?

NARRAMORE: Saturday afternoon was a good time to go to town. Do nothing more than sit in the car and just watch the people walk by.

TERRELL: How old were you when you moved to Fort Bend County?

NARRAMORE: My daughter was five years old.

TERRELL: When you moved here with your daughter, did you live on the farm?

NARRAMORE: Yes, we farmed for a few years, and then Poppa retired. So, I went out on different jobs. In those days, the government made mattresses for people who didn't have anything. The home demonstration agent hired me because they were not allowed to handle the money. So, I helped her. The first few weeks, we went to A&M for training. When we got back, we went to the fairgrounds which were just off US-90A in Rosenberg. The state brought some bales of cotton in there. We had to open them and make mattresses out of them. It was a dirty job. We made some good-looking mattresses! I was the leader of it. We stuffed the mattresses with cotton. and then we'd beat the heck out of them, to get the dust out.

TERRELL: The government handed out these mattresses for free?

NARRAMORE: Yes. We made somewhere around 50-60 mattresses. It was a government project, lasted about a year.

I never had to ask for a job. People came to me and asked me to work for them. I worked for Herbert Blase at Patless Grocery for 12 years. Herbert had the first grocery store with air conditioning in this town. At first, he didn't put the air conditioning in the whole building because it was a big building. He built one separate room for the fruit and vegetables, and that was air-conditioned. After about a year and a half, he air-conditioned the whole building.

TERRELL: How was Rosenberg changing?

NARRAMORE: You could see the advancement each year. More businesses came in. On Saturdays, when I was working for the grocery store, there were loads of Mexicans picking cotton, who came to the store. We'd work until maybe 10:00 at night to take care of them. Herbert had a nice store. He was a good guy. I enjoyed working for him.

TERRELL: After you left there, where did you go?

NARRAMORE: Katy and Fred Walger had a plumbing and bath store. I worked there about two years. They had good towels, like Fieldcrest, and it was kind of expensive. It seemed like the Booths were about the only ones who could afford those towels. So, they finally had to quit. They lived upstairs and the business was downstairs. That building is still there, on Avenue H.

Then I worked for Sears and Roebuck. They were hiring people, and told one of the bread men who was delivering the bread to tell me. I was at Luksa's at that time. The bread man whispered that to me so Mr. Luksa wouldn't hear. So, I quit and went to the meeting and sure enough, I was hired right away.

I was the assistant manager at Sears. Well, I really was the manager. They had a manager that they hired, and that poor man went to stealing right away. He wasn't there a week, and he started stealing. I always knew that he was doing it, but at first, I wouldn't say anything. Finally, I decided that if I didn't tell the company, they might blame me. So, I called Sears.

First, they called and said they were going to send a detective, and he would meet us at the Texas Grill. Then we'd go back to the store, and I was going to make out like I hadn't seen him. They took him into a room, and that poor man lied and put everything off on me. Everybody knew that he was lying. So, they fired him on the spot. When he got fired, he called me and said, "Come on, Clara. Let's go have some coffee across the street." Then I started crying. I thought, "Oh my goodness. How can you do this?"

Then Sears moved from there on to where Humpolas used to be. That was the last place they were until they moved out to where they are now on 90A.

TERRELL: Were you living in town then?

NARRAMORE: No, we were living at 1219 Walger. This was the first house, from here all the way to Hwy 36. There wasn't a house here. We bought this lot for \$500. Mr. Cecil Baker owned this land. He opened this addition.

TERRELL: So he planned to divide it all up?

NARRAMORE: Yes. It was his decision to put it all in blocks. That's why there are all those live oak trees. On every lot, he planted a live oak tree. We moved here the year Florence graduated, 1950, I think. When we moved here, he had to lay the water lines. Everything developed in no time once they had the utilities in here.

TERRELL: Where did you go to school?

NARRAMORE: Mound Hill, at Gay Hill, on the other side of Brenham.

TERRELL: You had a lot of jobs and you liked all of them?

NARRAMORE: I did! I never asked for a single one of those jobs. People came to the house. A dentist wanted me to work for him several times, but I didn't want that job. I didn't want to work for a dentist!

TERRELL: Did you like sales?

NARRAMORE: As long as it was good merchandise. If they put in cheap clothes, I didn't want to work there. When Houston built up and came so close, people all went to Houston, like they do now. We don't have a good dress shop. Etta Mae's dress shop was in two different places. They were downtown, and then they moved to a larger place just west of the Rose-Rich center in a free-standing building. One morning I went to work for Etta Mae (I always opened the store), and when I opened the door, I saw some clothes laying on the floor. I thought, "Uh oh, that wasn't there when we left last night." I locked it up, and went around to Mr. Kovacik's doughnut place right beside Etta Mae's shop. I went over there and said I thought somebody had broken into the store last night. He said, "Let's go around to the back." There were two shop doors kind of behind one another, Etta Mae's and Hubble's. Someone had broken into that store at the same time. They had really loaded up from both stores. Hubble's had a good men's shop.

Beecher Cochran, the husband of the lady who owned Etta Mae's died really young, right at the time when I was working there. Etta Mae was there until she closed up.

TERRELL: About how long did she have that store?

NARRAMORE: It was open a good many years. She carried really good women's clothes and pretty hats. She had A #1 merchandise. So many wedding dresses and all that. The day that President Kennedy was shot, Etta Mae was at the sewing machine doing alterations. I was standing there with her and the radio was on. That was 1963.

My last job was when Mr. Ralph Berkman opened a store here in town that he called Mr. Ralph's. He had a dress shop in Wharton. He and his wife went to Wharton every day and I was managing the shop here. He closed in 1960 because Houston was getting all our trade. He had good clothes for the first 10-15 years, and then the slump started. He was one swell-looking guy. He was a wonderful Jew. She was a little rough with me until one day I told Mr. Berkman I wasn't going to put up with this. I know that my English is not good; I came up German. Her language was much better than mine. He told her, "Come on Jeanie, let's go to the car." He went to the car, and he must have really bawled her out. When they came back, she was friendly and I never had any trouble after that.

TERRELL: Do you still speak German?

NARRAMORE: A little bit. Not much. We now have a minister from Germany. I belong to the United Church of Christ. He's a real young man, and he speaks German. His German is way above the German that we speak here. He had a German service a few weeks ago, and there were people from everywhere; a lot from Sugar Land. The choir sang and it was really nice. There is a German service in Spring, I think.

TERRELL: Could you understand it?

NARRAMORE: No. I don't understand very much and my hearing aid doesn't pick up everything.

TERRELL: What are your best memories of your childhood?

NARRAMORE: Before I was married, going to dances and things like that.

TERRELL: Where did you go to dances?

NARRAMORE: We went to a dance hall in Prairie Hill, on the other side of Brenham. In those days, there was a dance almost every Saturday night. You could go and enjoy yourself.

TERRELL: How old were you when you got married?

NARRAMORE: Twenty. Ed passed away in April of 1954.

TERRELL: How long before you married again?

NARRAMORE: Three years. He was a pipeline superintendent for United Gas Pipeline Company.

TERRELL: Where did you meet him?

NARRAMORE: (laughs) There were several women I knew real well because we went to dance at a little dance hall in part of Fred's Café. They said, "I want you to come over here. There's a guy who comes here that we want you to meet." I was so bashful, I didn't want to do that. They told me if I didn't come, they would come get me. I didn't want them to do that because if I went by myself, I could go home when I wanted to. So, I drove up there. As I got in Mama and Daddy's yard over there, I turned around and went back home. Those women were standing there, waiting. They didn't see me turn around! The next day they started in again. So, I did go up there. They introduced me to him, and that was it.

TERRELL: How long were you married?

NARRAMORE: I believe it was around 20 years. I was married longer to my second husband than I was Ed.

TERRELL: How long were you married to Floyd Narramore?

NARRAMORE: Floyd died in 1988, and we were married in 1957.

TERRELL: How long were you married to your first husband, Edwin Loesch?

NARRAMORE: I know we didn't get to celebrate our silver wedding anniversary. I think we were married about 22 years.

TERRELL: Is he Florence's father?

NARRAMORE: Yes.

TERRELL: Where does Florence live?

NARRAMORE: Florence lives in Midland. She married Bill Skinner from Richmond.

TERRELL: So you moved from Gay Hill to here when she was five years old. Was he still a farmer?

NARRAMORE: Yes, for a few years. Then he went to work for Fred Blase, at his service station. In those days, they delivered gasoline to all the farmers, so he was driving a truck doing that. One day, he had to haul that gasoline from Houston to the station, and he fell asleep while driving the truck. There was a car behind him, and they saw the truck turn over all of a sudden. He was lucky. No sparks started a fire.

I didn't know why he was so late, so I drove up to the station. I asked where Ed was and they said, "Come here." Hildegard took me upstairs. They had put him to bed over there. I thought, "Dammit, y'all could have called me!"

He was sick for one week. He had some kind of kidney disease. We didn't know anything. Easter Sunday, when we were getting dressed to go to church, he said, "You know, I sure don't feel good." He had just gotten some new glasses that week. He said, "I believe Dr. Wilkerson gave me the wrong lenses because they are foggy. I'm going to him in the morning and see what is wrong." He went there and Wilkerson told him to go see his main doctor. So, he went right over to Dr. Ben Kanaly, and the doctor told him he would never work another day. He told him to go home and go to bed. In the meantime, the doctor called me and told me he would never work again. He had a very serious sickness. Then Ed walked into the store where I was working. That was some shock. He didn't live longer than a week. We just have to take what comes.

TERRELL: You already had this house?

NARRAMORE: Yes. The house was a little different then. They used to have companies that would build houses and put them on your lot. We paid \$6,000 for the house and \$500 for the lot. You know, we weren't making much money, and you had to put it on a payment plan.

I went through some tough times, but I think about it, and I appreciate everything. We knew how to get out of it and what to spend our money on. We didn't have much. The oil company that my second husband worked for, United Gas Pipeline Company, was formed by a man from Louisiana. They had a lot of people working for them. But they were barely scraping by. I keep telling my granddaughter, who is a registered nurse and retired now, that when I worked, I worked a whole week. We put in a lot of hours at Herbert Blasé, for \$35 a week. She said, "Grandma, I make that in one hour." (laughing) I said, "I know."

TERRELL: What did you do for entertainment after you married Narramore?

NARRAMORE: He didn't dance. We didn't even get to go to Coushatta! With maybe \$200, you could go down there and have fun. The only reason I could go on living like I did after he died was I went to the casinos with my nephew and his wife. I enjoyed my ride going back and forth and just watching people, too. One time I was playing Double Diamonds, and that was \$2,500 at one pop. That's what kept me going. I'd spend a little money, but I'd make more than I went down there with.

TERRELL: Do you still go?

NARRAMORE: I went about two months ago. But before that, we went pretty regularly. I haven't been quite well.

TERRELL: Did you win when you went the last time?

NARRAMORE: No. The first time I ever went to a casino, I was in Las Vegas with Dalbert's wife, Shirley. When we walked in and I saw all those machines, I thought "Oh God, please don't look at me now." I thought I had just committed the worst sin there ever was by going in that place! (laughing)

TERRELL: You must have had a great time.

NARRAMORE: Oh, we did. That was the time that O. J. Simpson's trial was going on. We'd take out a little bit and sit down, and they couldn't get me away from the radio because that was so interesting. That young man was SO guilty. Did you know they ran that last week on television and it brought back all those memories?

TERRELL: So you didn't start gambling until later in life, after Floyd had passed away.

NARRAMORE: Yes. I never went back to Las Vegas. They go quite often, but I don't. That's a little more than I can afford.

TERRELL: Can you think of anything I haven't asked you that you would like to tell me?

NARRAMORE: Yes. We can talk about when we were kids. When we were teenagers, we played Hide and Go Seek. Mama's family was the Rust family, and almost every one of the Rust kids' farms were all around us. At night, we always went to visit each other. Nowadays, you don't do that.

One night I hid, and they couldn't find me. Every once in a while, I'd go "WOOOO" and they'd hear it, but they didn't know where it was coming from. We had an open well close to the house, and I crawled in one of the buckets in that well and let myself down to the water. If my kid had done that, I would have whipped her! We played dangerously.

My grandmother was dead, but she had two daughters who never got married, and they lived at the home place. They had beautiful horses and buggies. On Sunday afternoon in the winter, we'd either go rabbit hunting or get on horses and ride. I rode Grandma's horse. All of a sudden, one of the other guy's horse took off, and Grandma's horse wouldn't let any other horse be ahead of him.

Lord have mercy. There I sat, stiff as a board, scared to death. When I got off that horse that day, that was it!

TERRELL: Did you go hunting?

NARRAMORE: We shot snakes. We had a tank with water in it. I had a little rifle, and we'd shoot those snakes.

We were a one-room schoolhouse with about 60 pupils in the school. When I was in the 7th grade, I passed, and that's as far as they went. The next year Mama said I would have to go back to school. So, I went back to school, but the teacher was so shorthanded. I had to register, and I taught the first and second grade. One day I decided this was crazy. Here I was, where I could be doing work at home, and I wasn't getting paid for that. I came home with my book satchel. Mama asked me what was in my satchel. So, I told her, "I quit school today." She almost spanked me. She was pretty close to spanking me because I had quit school without her permission. That's when I started with the Home Demonstration Agent program.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Home Demonstration Agent organization had its humble beginnings in Milam County, Texas, in 1912 when Edna Westbrook Trigg started teaching girls' "tomato clubs." The quaint name states their original purpose – which had been the canning and preserving of tomatoes.

Like the course of "home economics" that was once taught in high schools across the country, the emphasis of home demonstration was on homemaking skills. By-products of the meetings included lifelong friendships and a good excuse to get away from home for a few hours. Meetings were often held in community buildings.

--www.TexasEscapes.com

Everybody asks me what's my secret for getting to this age. I usually tell them that I drink beer. (laughing)

TERRELL: Do you drink beer?

NARRAMORE: When I feel like I want one. I keep beer in the icebox, maybe months and months go by. All of a sudden, I feel like I want a beer, so I'll open one. I keep wine, too. When we play dominoes, we always drank a glass of wine during the domino party. There were two women in there who wouldn't touch it.

I want to tell you what happened last week. Somebody knocked on the door on Wednesday. There was a guy standing there. I opened the wooden door, but not the screen door, which has glass, too. He said, "Our computer just showed that you have a short in your electrical wires." By that time, I couldn't hear very well because of the glass, so I opened the door and he walked in and said, "I'm going to try all your faucets." So he went all through the house. When he got along here, he said, "Hey, where is everybody?" He wanted to see if there were any other people here. It didn't dawn on me then. He sent the other guy up in the attic and made out like he was doing something up there.

I couldn't go up there and see whether they had done anything. He said he sprayed for bugs up there. When he got through, he said, "That's \$1,500." I never believed I was so damned dumb. In the back of my mind, I began to wonder. But I wrote him a check, and after he was gone, everything started falling into place. I called the bank and told them to stop that check and they did. He didn't go to the bank with the check. About an hour later, he called and said, "I tore up that check." I said, "You did? Why?" I don't remember what he said; he mumbled something. I thought, "Well, that's all right – it's already been canceled." So, the next morning, I went to the bank. I closed my account and re-opened it with a different account number. My friend was here yesterday. They got her, too. We called the police, of course, that night. They had gotten into four different houses that day!

TERRELL: How awful! Thank you for sharing your memories with us.

Interview ends