FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: Clarence McLemore

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Interviewer: Diane L Ware

Transcriber:

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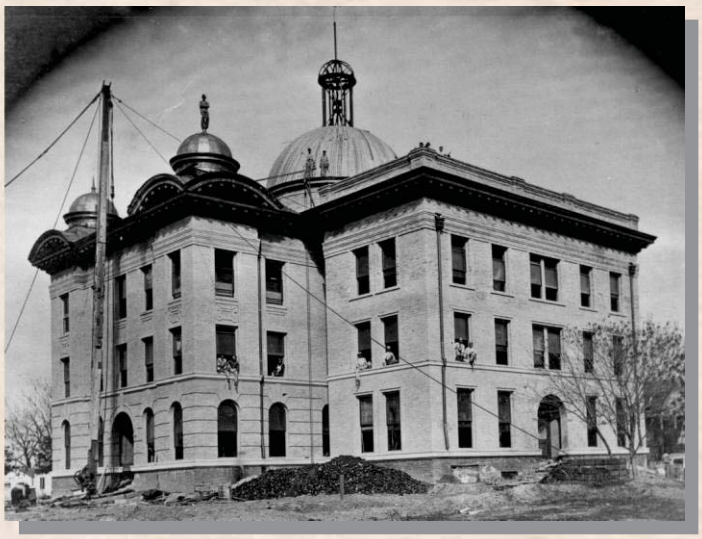
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Transcript

WARE: Let's start with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

McLEMORE: Tyler, Texas, on March 11, 1939.

WARE: You told me your father moved you to Sugar Land in 1945. What years did you attend M. R. Wood School?

McLEMORE: From 1949 to 1959.

WARE: Where did you live when you attended M. R. Wood School?

McLEMORE: I lived on Avenue C in The Quarters.

WARE: You use the term The Quarters. Tell me about that.

McLEMORE: Well, it basically was a company community that the I. H. Kempner [Imperial Sugar] refinery gave all the employees a place to live. It was like a closed community, encircled by Oyster Creek. It was just like a horseshoe and we were in that area. From The Hill to the east to the fields that were on the west side was called The Quarters.

WARE: Who lived in The Quarters?

McLEMORE: Hispanics and Blacks.

WARE: Let's go back to M. R. Wood School. About how many students were there?

McLEMORE: About 300 total, including the elementary through the high school.

WARE: And where did those students come from?

McLEMORE: They came from the surrounding area, like Arcola, Rosharon, Sandy Point and all of the small Colored areas that was in Fort Bend County, east, west, north, all of them.

WARE: That's a large population for a school, 300 students.

McLEMORE: It included all of Stafford, Missouri City, Piney Point, Sandy Point, Rosharon and all of those.

WARE: About how many kids were in an average classroom?

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McLEMORE: About 20.

WARE: Did you get a lot of personal attention?

McLEMORE: Yes, we did. The Black teachers were very strict, so there weren't any shenanigans going on. We had to learn and we had to obey. They were really strict.

WARE: Do you remember Principal Charles Jingles?

McLEMORE: Yes, I remember when he came.

WARE: Tell me about him.

McLEMORE: He was a good man. He was a good teacher. He and his wife [S.L.F. Jingles] both came at the same time. She was in charge of the 12th grade and he was Principal. Before him was Mr. C.M. Mosby.

I'm trying to remember where they were from. Near San Antonio, I think. But they were fine teachers.

WARE: Mr. Mosby was there when you started?

McLEMORE: Yes, he was there before they built the new school, which was in 1952. He was there when we had the wooden buildings.

WARE: Can you describe the wooden buildings to me?

McLEMORE: There was one that sat in the center of the lot, which was the auditorium and separate classrooms. They had those folding doors that when you folded the doors back you had the auditorium. When the folding doors were opened out, they were classrooms.
We had one main big building in the center, one building to the right was agriculture and one to the left was the typing building. So there were three original buildings there before they built the new building.

WARE: So the original main auditorium building was more academic and then the more vocational like agricultural and typing on the sides.

McLEMORE: Yes. But in all of the buildings there were classrooms. We had 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade in one portion of the main building to the right, which would be on the east side of the main building. And 4th, 5th, and 6th grades were in a separate room in that building. And when it wasn't those three classrooms, then it was Ag. The main building was from 6th grade and 7th grade to high school. The other building for typing, we called the Commercial Building. And that was the whole school.

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WARE: Describe the school they built in 1952 and compare it.

McLEMORE: It was just like night and day. The new one was red brick. From one end it practically filled the whole lot. The elementary was on the west side of the building and midway were the bathrooms, male and female, and then on the east end was the high school.

WARE: And there was an auditorium in there?

McLEMORE: No, we didn't have an auditorium then until we built the gym.

WARE: Do you remember when the gym was built?

McLEMORE: Probably two years after, about 1954.

WARE: I'm not finding many photos of the school buildings, so I'm depending on a lot of descriptions to provide a picture what it looked like.

McLEMORE: The only one that I know of is the one that was in the first part of the yearbook that we had in 1959. That's the only picture I remember we have.

WARE: That's the only picture I've seen.

What were some of your favorite classes?

McLEMORE: If you consider band a class, that was my favorite. The rest of them were gruesome. (Laughter) I did well in all my classes, because they were all only fundamental. We never had algebra. We had what they called high mathematics. We had English and spelling, and really, really simple classes. Nothing difficult. Just the basics.

WARE: Tell me about your experience with band.

McLEMORE: Well, before that, I was going to play football, but that was only two days. Then I decided I was going to get into the band. It was brand new. Before we had a band, we had what they called flutophones. That was our first band. The music teacher, Harlan Moore, organized the band. The school bought us a set a flutophones and we had turtleneck yellow sweatshirts and purple pants that they made at school. Then we got a regular band about two years later.

WARE: How old were you when you played the flutophone?

McLEMORE: I was probably 13 or 14 years old.

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WARE: Then you got a regular band director?

McLEMORE: Yes, Harlan Moore.

WARE: That was in the early 1950s?

McLEMORE: Yes, 1953, 1954, 1955.

WARE: Tell me about Mr. Moore.

McLEMORE: He was a good band teacher. He was patient, he was thorough, and he knew his job. We were all green as Kentucky apples as far as understanding anything about music. It was kind of a tough time for him, but we learned really well because he was very attentive to teaching us. He was very thorough.

WARE: Did he teach you how to read music?

McLEMORE: Yes. That was one of his fortes. He said if you can't read music, you can't play it. That was one of his basic things. And we all read music. We performed for the white people when we got ready to show off the band in our suits. We went to Lakeview and we performed for the constituents over there to show how well we were doing.

WARE: Were some of those people the leaders of the [Imperial] sugar company?

McLEMORE: It was the School Board and the students. We went into their auditorium and we played for them.

WARE: Was it just one time?

McLEMORE: We only did it one time and it was basically after that we got our uniforms.
Harlan wouldn't let us go until we got it right, so we could make a good impression. It might have been 1956 of 1957, or thereabouts.

But I was in the band until I finished school, so from 1954 or 1955 until 1959.

WARE: Wasn't there a marching band as well?

McLEMORE: We were the marching band, too. We did concerts and marching. We marched during the football games and then we did concerts.
WARE: Did you play at dances or anything like that?

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McLEMORE: No. We played for Mr. Jingles' church a couple of times and I think we went to A. W. Jackson [Colored School in Rosenberg] a couple of times.

WARE: About how many people were in the marching band?

McLEMORE: Same people as the concert band, so it was probably 15 of us.

WARE: What instrument did you play?

McLEMORE: I played the E flat horn, the French horn, and I played drums. And I played Alto Sax. We had a little dance band that we had, so I played in that.

WARE: Who did the dance band play for?

McLEMORE: Just for the students.

WARE: How often did you have dances?

McLEMORE: We played in The Quarters at the American Legion Hall when we had a youth outing or something. And we would play on Sunday evening for an hour for the kids. If we had a regular dance, we used 45 [rpm] records.

WARE: Because you can't dance if you're in the band, right?!

McLEMORE: Right! (laughter)

WARE: It sounds like you really liked Mr. Moore.

McLEMORE: He and I were good buddies. I was the student band director. And he was a bus driver, too. When we got out of school, I rode with him to take the students to Four Corners and the Richmond Bottoms and places where we dropped them off. I went with him just for the company.

WARE: Was he married?

McLEMORE: No.

WARE: Was he a young man?

McLEMORE: He was probably 24 or 25.

WARE: How long did he stay at M. R. Wood?

McLEMORE: He stayed until 1959. He stayed until I graduated.

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WARE: Who were some of your closest friends in high school?

McLEMORE: Joyce Williams and Pete (Harold Williams), Catherine Johnson, and Lois Mae Foy.

WARE: I knew she was close friend.

McLEMORE: Yes, I married her! And I was friends with her sister, Charles Ray.

WARE: That brings up a question that I had. I found a list of some of the winners of the Imperial Sugar scholarship.

McLEMORE: Charles Ray was one of them.

WARE: Did she go to Prairie View A & M then?

McLEMORE: Yes.

WARE: And did she graduate?

McLEMORE: Yes.

WARE: What did she do after she graduated?

McLEMORE: She worked for Shell Oil.

WARE: I have to tell you, I thought Charles Ray was a man's name.

McLEMORE: Right. I don't know why they named her that. Lois's name was actually LauRance. That's the way they spelled it on her birth certificate. She changed it because she didn't like it. When we got ready to get our Social Security numbers, she changed it. We just went to Austin and changed everything and made her name Lois.

WARE: Sometimes I will see a different name and it's confusing to me, so thank you for clarifying that.

Different schools are known for athletics or music. What was M. R. Wood known for?

McLEMORE: Football. Basketball. We were the champions in District A. We were single A and in our District we were the champs.

WARE: How many years were you district champions?

McLEMORE: I think we may have had at least three.

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WARE: Were you in high school at that time?

McLEMORE: Yes.

WARE: Who was the coach?

McLEMORE: Hollis Felder.

WARE: Tell me about Mr. Felder.

McLEMORE: He was a graduate of TSU [Texas State University] and he was our last coach. We had Kuykendahl and then we had some student coaches who came through, who were learning. They were all from TSU and doing their internship, student teaching, at M. R. Wood.

WARE: Who was the winningest coach?

McLEMORE: Probably Kuykendahl because that was the early part of our seasons. The rest of the schools, such as Hungerford and Angleton, weren't very good. So we were winning. They got better later on with Felder.

WARE: When you are talking about the marching band marching up and down the field did you have moves like dance moves or just military marching?

McLEMORE: We did some movements because we were doing the same things that the colleges were doing, like TSU. Harlan Moore was teaching us to do crisscross and circling, nothing difficult. We did 30 minutes on the field between the games.

WARE: So it was a show.

McLEMORE: Yes. Did you see the picture of me and my wife when we did the Homecoming?

WARE: I'm going to ask you about that, but you can tell me now. There's a picture out of the 1959 Panther yearbook.

McLEMORE: (pointing to picture) That's me. That's her. That's Jewel Holloway. That's Alfred Smallwood. And that's Lester Shavers. And that's Lois's competitor (Barbara Ann Thomson).

WARE: In the 1959 Panther, this picture of Miss M. R. Wood is Lois Mae Foy--who became your wife--and you. Did they elect a Miss M. R. Wood every year?

McLEMORE: This was the only time.

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WARE: It was done specifically for the yearbook?

McLEMORE: Yes.

We kind of fudged it a little bit. The competition was with Barbara, so it was a race to get the votes. I bought all of the elementary votes with candy. That's how we won.

WARE: So you gave the children in the elementary school candy so they would vote for Lois and not vote for Barbara Ann Thompson?

McLEMORE: From the 6th grade on down. Right. Because she was my girl, so we just kind of bought the election.

WARE: Good thing she married you after that.

McLEMORE: Nobody was going to have Lois except me. (Laughter) She was my babe. They screamed and hollered about it, but it was too late. The little kids went for the candy.

WARE: Interesting.

How often did you have school dances?

McLEMORE: Not often. A lot of our kids couldn't be there, because they were from Arcola and the surrounding areas. And we didn't have school dances because they didn't want us to mess up the gym floor.

WARE: So not even a sock hop?

McLEMORE: No. They were very strict about the floor. I remember one of the Board members said that "You Ns better not mess up this floor." He actually said it!

WARE: Oh, wow.

McLEMORE: And he said it in front of the whole auditorium, the whole congregation. But that was the way it was then.

WARE: The only people who used that auditorium were M. R. Wood students?

McLEMORE: Right. We did have tournaments there, but no dancing.

WARE: You started to tell me what kind of wood the floor was made of.

McLEMORE: Maple.

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WARE: That's one of the only auditoriums around that Black people are using, right?

McLEMORE: No, A. W. Jackson School in Rosenberg had one. They were just as strict about theirs as we were.

WARE: Did any famous people ever come to that gym?

McLEMORE: Stevie Wonder.

WARE: So he was fairly young?

McLEMORE: He was probably 10 or 11 years old. They were doing all of the schools back in those days. And all the blues singers. Willie Mae Thornton came. That was the only way they could get any type of notoriety. They had to go to all these little venues.

WARE: Did you go to those performances?

McLEMORE: Yes. We had that little auditorium and Stevie Wonder played his little harmonica and he wagged his head. He was really skinny and we all wanted to be like him.

WARE: Interesting.

When you graduated in 1959, who was your commencement speaker?

McLEMORE: I think that Mr. Jingles took care of all of it. He was very particular about his school and [felt strongly] about who was going to be there. He was going to be in charge.

WARE: Would you consider him a friend?

McLEMORE: He and his wife were strict disciplinarians. I had a better relationship with her. He was strictly the schoolmaster. He ran a tight ship. When I got into 12th grade, she was my homeroom teacher, and we got really close. Years later, we eventually went to the same church, the Worldwide Church of God, Herbert W. Armstrong.

WARE: I know you only had the one yearbook. How did that yearbook come to be?

McLEMORE: Mrs. [S.L.F.] Jingles, the Principal's wife, decided that she was going to retire that year and not teach anymore so she wanted a record. She organized it and all the teachers got together, had all the pictures taken and that's how it happened.

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WARE: Do you think the teachers paid for it?

McLEMORE: The school paid for it. They might have gotten funding from the School Board.

WARE: That's the year after Fort Bend ISD formed.

McLEMORE: Yes. Apparently they got permission to do the yearbook so the funding probably came from the School Board.

WARE: Interesting.

What was Mrs. Jingles first name?

McLEMORE: Sally. I think it was Sally Mae. We just called her Mrs. They were very strict. Not harsh, not brutal, not abusive, but very strict. There were no shenanigans, no foolishness. And they practiced corporal punishment.

WARE: Do you feel you would have gotten as good an education at another school?

McLEMORE: I really couldn't say because I never went to another school. A. W. Jackson and M. R. Wood were the two best schools [for Black children] in Fort Bend County. Hungerford and the others were small schools and were further west. We didn't take in Hungerford. I think we stopped at Richmond. Richmond Bottoms is what they called it. All the little country kids down in the woods. We took them and A. W. Jackson took those west of that.

WARE: So Richmond was split between which school they went to?

McLEMORE: Right.

WARE: Do you remember the musical group that came out of M. R. Wood, The Four Tempos? Did you ever hear about them?

McLEMORE: Yes, I did. Four Black boys?

WARE: Yes.

McLEMORE: They went to California. One was my brother-in-law.

WARE: Who was that?

McLEMORE: Al Irvin Foy. The other boy was from Four Corners.

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WARE: Tell me about your brother-in-law, Al Foy. What made them go out to California?

McLEMORE: They started singing on Sunday evenings out on the porch. They decided they were going to go to California and be the like the Four Tops and everybody else. They did real good. They did a demo and had about five or six demos. They had nice black and white pictures. They distributed those pictures. They did good for about five years.

WARE: So they had some success.

McLEMORE: Yes. But there were just so many of those groups. There were a thousand of them everywhere. It was tough going. I don't think they sold a lot of records but they did good for themselves.

WARE: Did Al come back to Sugar Land or back to Texas?

McLEMORE: No, he didn't come back. He stayed out in California. He got sick or something and died. We were all proud of him because he was doing well.

WARE: He was a home-grown celebrity.

Let's go back to those Imperial scholarships. I could find only four that were given out. You mentioned that your wife's sister got one.

McLEMORE: Donny Sampson was the first (1957). Joe Lemon, then Charles Ray Foy (1959), Virginia Lee Sessums (1961), Ferndell Henry (1963). The alternate years the scholarship was awarded to a student at Sugar Land High School.

WARE: Everyone went to Prairie View A & M?

McLEMORE: Right.

WARE: What about Joe Lemon?

McLEMORE: Charles Ray got Joe Lemon's scholarship because he didn't want to go to college. He went into the Army. So they had two recipients. And the reason Charles Ray got it was because Joe Lemon refused it.

WARE: It was awarded based on academics?

McLEMORE: Yes. I was supposed to get it, but truancy got me. I wouldn't go to school.

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WARE: This is confession time here, isn't it?

McLEMORE: I didn't have a parent so I went when I got ready.

WARE: It looks like you started alumni reunions around 1999. At that time, did anyone ask, "Where's all the stuff that was left at the school [when it closed in 1959]?"

McLEMORE: Yes, 1999. We looked for it like a hound dog. We scoured all over the county, went to all the warehouses and looked for the piano. We did everything we could to find everything. We just assumed they destroyed it. We had had a cabinet in the school foyer that was twice that size with nothing but trophies. We couldn't find any of them.

WARE: So a cabinet about 20 feet long?

McLEMORE: Yes. Football trophies, basketball trophies, and all that paraphernalia was in that cabinet. It was adjacent to the Principal's office.

WARE: What other kind of artifacts disappeared?

McLEMORE: Certificates and things like that; awards and things we had achieved at the school, that were framed and put in the cabinet.

WARE: You went to warehouses and looked for things?

McLEMORE: We did. All the alumni went everywhere we could think of. We found nothing.

WARE: The School Board let you into those places?

McLEMORE: The maintenance people did.

WARE: We're looking for letter jackets, a copy of The Four Tempo's record they made, or letters from playing in the band. Do you have anything like that?

McLEMORE: I had a couple of jackets but on May 21, 1959, the bell rang and we threw everything straight up in the air. I didn't save a thing.

WARE: If you hear of anybody who does have something, would you let me know?

McLEMORE: Jewel [Hamilton] says that she thinks she can find a sweater from one of the basketball girls. I talked to her about that the other day and I think she's going to get that. When are they going to open the auditorium?

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WARE: I don't know. With the pandemic, we don't know. And it will be a few months before we have an actual museum in there.

McLEMORE: We'll try to get everything to you that we can.

WARE: The more quickly we can get it, the better. We lose people, and their children throw things out. We don't want that to happen.

What have I forgotten to ask you? What do you want to tell me?

McLEMORE: I just want to say that there was a very wonderful thing about the school I went to, the Colored school. There were no variables; there was no bullying. There was none of that, and we were all the same kind. Personally, I think that integration changed a lot of that, especially for the Blacks, and whites, for the simple fact that we just don't mix.

WARE: So you feel it was better having a segregated school?

McLEMORE: I do. I believe in separate but equal, which they don't do. That's the reason we integrated because separate but equal won't work.

WARE: So it was separate, but it wasn't equal.

McLEMORE: It won't ever be equal if separate. But it's better. It's kind of like having two families. The woman comes in with her set of family after a divorce and then the new husband has two kids. The bonding is never there. That's the problem David had in the Bible. When you have all these wives, they never bond. You don't bond. You have to be one race in one place. Things that you have in common. The cultures don't mix.

WARE: That's an interesting view.

McLEMORE: That's the reason we have all the problems because we are trying to put everybody together. And that isn't the way it is. People eat differently, they dress differently, and there is always judging. When you do all of that, it causes conflict. And when you have conflict, then you have war. You don't like the way they do this, it's not the same [as your] way. I think in the future, WAY in the future, everybody is going to be under their own fig tree so it's not going to be a problem. Like birds. There are no jaybirds and red birds running together, but they are all birds. They get along because they don't mix. That's not segregation; that's just the order of nature. And if you do it like that, you're happy. But now we've got to do what we're doing. There is no other alternative. Someday will be a better day.

WARE: I appreciate your time. Thank you very much.

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