

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Clyde Thomas (C. T.) Renfrow**

Interview Date: 12/07/2015

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Megan Moore

Location: Fort Bend County Courthouse, Richmond, Texas

25 Pages



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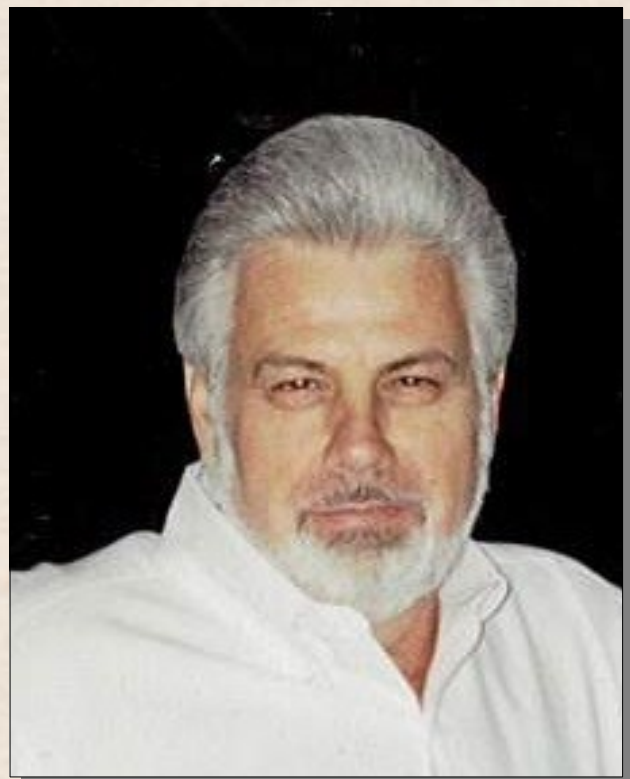
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Transcript

GOODSILL: Hello. This is Jane Goodsill; and I'm interviewing Clyde Thomas Renfrow, known as "CT", on December 7, 2015. How did your people get to Texas?

RENFROW: Originally my grandfather, Clyde B. Renfrow, was in North Carolina and for some reason he and most of his family moved to Fresno, TX. My dad and his brother, Cap, were ranchers like their dad, Clyde, throughout Fort Bend County. My Dad decided to settle in Fresno in 1945, which was two years after I was born. So in 1945, we moved to Fresno and lived in a little house across a railroad track from the country store that my dad decided to purchase.



Renfrow Grocery Store and Gas Station at the corner of FM 521 and Trammel-Fresno Road.

GOODSILL: Is it still there?

RENFROW: The original store is still there but it's been moved behind the original property. When my dad passed away my brother, Bob, took over the store and he remodeled. When my brother, Bob, passed away his son, Robbie Renfrow, took over ownership. It's still called Renfrow Grocery at the corner of FM 521 and Trammel-Fresno Road.

GOODSILL: Was he older?

RENFROW: He was older, yes ma'am. His name was Bob Renfrow.

GOODSILL: What was your father's name?

RENFROW: My father's name was Alford Renfrow, Senior. He was an entrepreneur. I didn't even know what that word meant until I got old enough to understand that my dad's purpose in life, was to take care of us kids, take care of his cattle and – I think, in that order. But he did love his cows! He had a dairy at one time. He also owned all the businesses that you could own in Fresno. He owned the grocery store, the service station, and a meat killing plant that was in the back of the store when we were kids. He did all his own butchering for the store. We would ride the pastures and he would pick out the best calf in his herd and he would actually shoot the calf from the bed of the truck. Then we would take it, we'd process, and we would take it to the killing plant, which was in the back of the store, and my dad would butcher it.

People from the store would put in their order for various cuts of meats and he would package it up. What was left was put in the fresh and frozen counters and people would come in and buy it. He would do maybe one calf a month until the federal government came in with inspections and regulations like that. I must have been eight or nine years old, so that would be maybe 1950 or 52, because that's the first memory I had of it.

My dad was also a farmer; he planted hay for his cattle. I had another brother, there were three of us. The oldest was Al Renfrow, Jr. We were taught to work. We worked and, boy, we worked from daylight to dark when we weren't sleeping. We had the dairy, which was run by all the boys. My dad would help us when we needed but he was the money man. He's the one that bought the cows. We had about 150 head of dairy cattle.



C. T., Bob, and Al Renfrow

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the interview with C. T.'s brother, Al Renfrow, Jr. and his wife, Shirley Ruth Borden Renfrow on this website at <http://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=30520>

GOODSILL: It was handy that he had three boys.

RENFROW: Yes, it was (with humor). That's why I said a while ago, I hope he loved the kids' number one, next to his cattle. Because he really did. His life was his cows. He had about 300 head of beef cows. He had horses and we worked horses and we worked cattle on the horses. All my life we had horses that we had to take care of. Horses were right there behind the store. We maintained and fed the horses and fed them grain and the hay. He also owned a feed store. The feed for the cattle and horses came from the store and Sugarland Industries.

GOODSILL: Well, it's all integrated. You have crops so you can feed the animals. Then you have the animals so that you can butcher them and sell them.

RENFROW: We had the service station, too, so when we had to fill up and repair the tractors, well the service station supplied the fuel. My dad was very active in the church. He was one of the directors of Fresno Methodist Church, ever since I can remember. When the doors opened we were at church. So he taught us, definitely, a religious belief with the Methodists. My mother was there with us and taught us the importance of practicing our religion.

GOODSILL: What was your mother's name?

RENFROW: My mother was Margaret Abercrombie Renfrow. She was from Navasota, Texas.

GOODSILL: How did they meet?

RENFROW: They met because when she graduated from Sam Houston State she got a job teaching in the House Plantation School. That's the area that's now Sienna Plantation. I think the Catholics had the Daughters of the Revolution or something. I don't know what it was called. But they had a church school and she taught at that school. My dad was a rancher. So he had all the cows in the area. He just so happened to meet up with her and they got to seeing each other, got to dating, and eventually married.

My grandfather's name was Clyde Burhman Renfrow. His wife, my grandmother's name was Louise Manning Renfrow. The Manning's are still in North Carolina. When we have a family reunion, well, we go to North Carolina.

GOODSILL: Must have been a culture shock for Margaret when she got down to Fresno.

RENFROW: (laughs softly) It was. But she did real well. They had a very good marriage. I think they respected each other and a lot of people would probably say that my mother was the business end of the relationship. But my dad would always say, "That's not true. I just liked the way mom runs the business."

GOODSILL: And dad could do anything.

RENFROW: Dad could do ANYTthing. There is nothing that my dad did that he was not successful at. He was unbelievable. Of course, we had to measure up to that; he pushed us constantly. At one time I would have probably said that he worked us to death. But he gave us a good work ethic that all of us continued.

GOODSILL: Tell me the birth order.

RENFROW: Birth order. Al and Bob, then Helen, and I'm number four. Then my sister, Carolyn, is number five.

GOODSILL: What did your father look like?

RENFROW: He dressed in a khaki uniform all the time. I think he liked the uniform look because he worked for Houston Linen Service and had a grocery store up by Sears on Nalen Street, in Houston, right across from Houston Linen Service.



Margaret Renfrow, Fresno, Texas, postmaster for 35 years.

My mother would run the store and my dad would run his route. Then he saved up enough money to be able to buy the store in Fresno. He looked kind of like a typical farmer. I think he's a very nice looking guy. He had a pretty big build. He was probably 195, 200 pounds. He was a very strong man and a lot of people in Fresno, I think, really respected him. Not only was he the resident deputy of Fresno, my mother was the postmaster or postmistress; she ran the post office for thirty five years in Fresno.

GOODSILL: She must have known everything that happened in town.

RENFROW: She knew everything! She was in the store and my dad partitioned the store – that was the post office and everybody was General Delivery. You went by name. When they came in they'd ask for Tom Jones' mail and my mother would hand it across the counter. But no boxes, no delivery like we have today. Everybody had to come to the store to do all their transactions.

When she'd introduce me, she'd introduce me as C. T. Renfrow, and I would shake their hand and I would say, "Yes I'm my third sibling of my mother's first husband." And, of course everybody would say, "Her first husband?" And my mother would always say, "Don't tell them that." And I said, "Well, mom, you only had one husband!" I would always kid my mom. It was always that kind of relationship. I kind of had my mother under my thumb and I could get anything I wanted from my her.



Alford Renfrow, Senior, with Margaret Abercrombie Renfrow

GOODSILL: Sometimes it's that way when you're toward the end of the line and a boy. What did your mom look like?

RENFROW: She was Most Beautiful at Sam Houston State Teacher's College. So she was a very, very beautiful, beautiful lady.

GOODSILL: Dark hair or light hair?

RENFROW: Dark hair, until it turned white.

GOODSILL: And eyes?

RENFROW: She had dark eyes. Beautiful, beautiful picture. In fact, I have a picture of her and a picture of my dad.

RENFROW: All my brothers and my sisters, I think, are – we couldn't win a beauty pageant – but we're good, upstanding people.

GOODSILL: You might be able to win in efficiency, an efficiency contest. Getting things done.

RENFROW: Could do it. Getting things done. Yes, they do. My dad was very efficient. And my mother, too. They had to be efficient because of all the businesses they ran.

GOODSILL: Right!

RENFROW: My dad loved to fish, but we really never had time to fish. I can count on one hand how many times my dad and I went fishing. It was probably the most when I had a boat and was married, and would just tell him, "Dad, you've got to go fishing with me." And he would go fishing.

GOODSILL: But he didn't have a whole lot of leisure time?

RENFROW: He didn't have leisure time. When he had leisure time he spent it in the church or doing something for the church. Or doing something with the deputy department. But he was dad. We knew he was always coming home. We knew he was going to be there. Of course, either him or my mom were in the store, you know, all the time.

GOODSILL: So they were a constant presence. Even though they were busy.

RENFROW: Yes. Constant presence. And they really got along. I think today, in today's times, there's very few couples where the husband and wife can work together all that time and get along the way they did. Of course, this is a long time ago, you know?

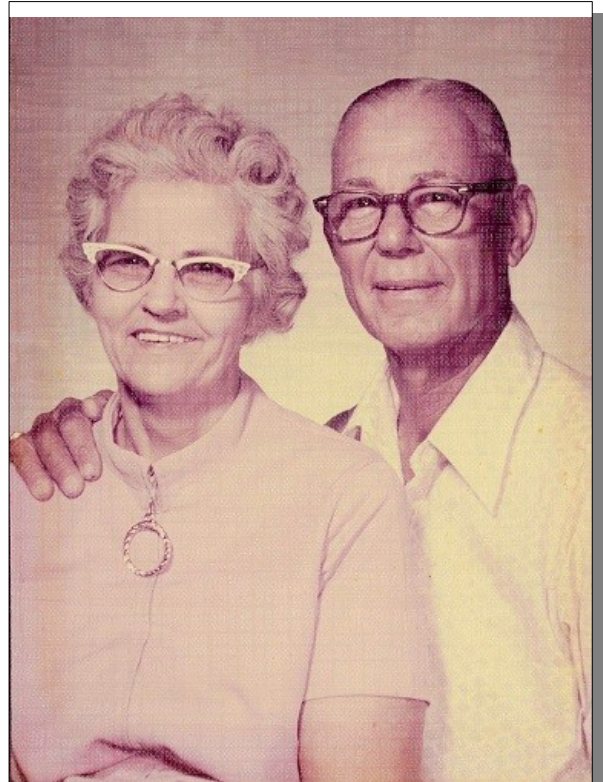
GOODSILL: Well, let's see. Your dad moved here in about 1945.

RENFROW: Yes. He moved to Fresno because all of his brothers and sisters were here.

GOODSILL: Well how many brothers and sisters did he have?

RENFROW: Let me give you their names. The oldest was Cap; Cap Renfrow. Then we had Preston Renfrow, who lived in Houston. He ran a bunch of apartments in Houston. Next was Bedford who lived to be eleven years old. I don't know what he died from. I just remember they used to talk about him living to eleven years old. Then my dad. Buddy Renfrow, was the youngest. My dad also had two sisters who lived in Fresno; Bessie Burford and Ada Woodfin. The Woodfins were ranchers and also had a dairy farm. They all lived in Fresno. Weldon Burford, one of her sons, was a little bit older than I was, and he's the one that I ran with just about, oh, probably 75% of the time when we were in Fresno. We used to hunt and fish and my dad really liked him, so he would let me go with him. I'd be able to spend my time going fishing and playing and not having to work. But then when I came back, I always had my chores. A lot of the times Weldon would help me with my chores to get them done.

My grandfather Clyde owned apartments in Houston, too. My grandfather lived in Houston most of the time that I was acquainted with him. I lost him when I was nine. So I didn't know my grandfather that well. He lost his eye and he had a glass eye. I can remember he would come in and he would pull his eye out (with humor) and he didn't have real good sight in his other eye so he used the red cane, the striped cane that all people that had eye problems did back during that time.



Margaret and Al Renfrow

If you walked by him and didn't say, "Sir" he would reach out and grab you by that cane and pull you back. I was a little bit afraid of him. But he taught us a lot about how to respect the older. This lesson taught us how to deal with a lot of customers in the store. All the kids worked in the store. We unpacked and put up groceries and did everything our parents told us to do.

I liked to tell people that we lived off the spoils. A lot of people don't understand that if you are in the grocery business you don't get the choice cuts of meat; you get all that is left over. If we had a bent can we couldn't put it on the shelf, that is what my mother cooked. If we were opening the Cheerios or something and we accidentally cut the box top, well, we had to eat the cereal because it was something we couldn't sell. When the potatoes had a bad spot on them, well, my mother would cut the bad spot off and that's what we had for dinner. Which, it wasn't bad. It's just that we had to use and eat it to keep from throwing it away. Remember, there were seven of us in the family.

GOODSILL: The spoils.

RENFROW: Yeah, the spoils. I 'm always kidding my dad about that. He would go into town and buy a stalk of bananas. We never could sell them all. We had bananas constantly. When we'd ask, "Mom can we have a sweet?" She'd say, "Go get a banana." I tell everybody, "I didn't know a banana was yellow until I got married. We always got the bananas that had spots on them. I ate a lot of bananas with a spoon." (both laugh). When they got bad we made banana cake and homemade banana ice cream.

My older sister, Helen, was a tremendous cook who cooked for the whole family. What my mother couldn't provide for us, as nurturing, my two sisters did. My mother, even being as busy as she was, would take care of all our laundry and the girls would assist with laundry and cleaning the house.

GOODSILL: And the laundry facilities in those days were?

RENFROW: We always had a washing machine in the backyard. No dryer. We always hung the clothes out on the clothes line.

I remember when my dad would bring the calves in that he'd just butchered, and he'd lay out a slab of beef and he'd trim it and it'd sometimes take him half a day to trim, just to cut up the whole thing. He took everything that he could and put it into hamburger because everybody wanted the hamburger. That was about the cheapest cut of meat you could buy. So we very seldom ever got hamburger meat. You had to sell it.

So we packaged it up and then if we wanted to make hamburgers, my dad would have to take a sirloin steak, put it in the machine and grind it up for my mother. We had prime sirloin burgers. Not because we didn't like the other fat hamburgers, but because there was no hamburger left. The people had bought all the hamburger. Our main goal was to take care of our customers.

I can remember there were very few paved roads. All dirt roads in Fresno. Well, they had gravel and dirt and stuff mixed in and they'd come in with a grader and they'd grade the roads. We'd have customers that would call in – didn't have an automobile – we had a truck, and if we could get to them in the truck, we'd deliver their groceries. But a lot of times, I remember saddling up my horse and taking groceries, sacks of feed, on the back of my horse and delivering it to the people that didn't have automobiles. It was a big job.

GOODSILL: Probably easier than going on muddy or rutted roads.

RENFROW: Sometimes you couldn't get down the roads, they'd be so muddy. There was just no way. And the grader hadn't been by yet, and you'd bog down in a rut.

GOODSILL: What kind of truck did you have?

RENFROW: We usually had a Chevrolet. And we usually bought Chevrolet automobiles. My dad was always of the opinion that you couldn't go out and buy a Cadillac, or a big automobile because the customers would relate that to your business. He kind of had that feeling that you should drive something that all the rest of the people in the neighborhood would drive. Don't live beyond your means.

GOODSILL: Don't look ostentatious.

RENFROW: Yeah. My mother and dad never did. I don't ever remember my parents worrying about finances. My mother was a saver. I can remember that she saved dimes. When the customers would come in and give us a dime, we put that dime in a little box and that's what she saved for our vacations. Today, if I have pocket of change, you can pick it out and most of it will be dimes. She taught me not to spend my dimes. If someone needed the change, we'd give them two nickels, rather than a dime. (GOODSILL laughs)

GOODSILL: Your mother was a saver. But your father had to spend to buy some of his businesses and to keep the businesses going. So how did that work?

RENFROW: He always had a real good connection with South Main State Bank on Alameda, for many, many years; they handled a lot of his purchases. But he also had a father, my grandfather.

GOODSILL: Clyde.

RENFROW: Yes, he was in the cattle business. My dad told me that he was put in charge of counting the cows as they went through the gate – now these are my grandfather's cows. When he would count to a hundred, he would tie a knot in his rein and then he would start counting from the next hundred. He said at one time he had nine knots on his reins. Which means he had over nine hundred head of cattle. Now this will tell you what kind of rancher my grandfather was. He owned apartment houses in Houston.

GOODSILL: So that's where your father got it from?

RENFROW: Yeah, my grandfather helped my dad and all of his family with finances. When we moved to the store, I think my grandfather loaned my dad the money plus interest. My dad had the same thing with the kids – all of us kids, when we bought our first homes, my dad loaned us the money at no interest. And we had to pay him back. We paid him back monthly, or however we could pay him back. That's all of us – that's five kids.

GOODSILL: In case people don't know, help us pinpoint where Fresno is.

RENFROW: It's two miles south of Alameda and it borders the outskirts of Pearland. It's about two miles north of Arcola. I think the reason they chose Fresno was because my uncle, Harvey Barnes, had a dairy farm in Fresno. This was my mother's side of the family. When my dad moved to Fresno, he bought the store and then he went into business with Harvey, with the dairy business.

GOODSILL: Harvey is your mother's brother?

RENFROW: No. My mother's brother-in-law, my mother's sister's husband. My mother had four siblings; T. V. Abercrombie, Lillie Mae Barnes, and Hugh, who passed away when he was young, and then my mother, Margaret Abercrombie.

GOODSILL: Okay. But you didn't tell me their parents' names. Do you know your mother's parents' names? Your grandmother and grandfather.

RENFROW: Yes. My mother's father is Frank Abercrombie, who was a rancher in Navasota. He grew watermelons. As a kid, I can remember going to Navasota and there would be so many watermelons. My dad, owning the store, would also buy watermelons from my grandfather and we would bring them down to the store and sell them.

He would carry his watermelons with a wagon. Now we had a car. But I can remember the old wagons that my grandfather used to take his melons to the store and those places. My brothers used to help him. I never was able. I was too young.

GOODSILL: Must have been hard work harvesting those watermelons.

RENFROW: I can remember going out in the heat of the day and those watermelons would be sitting there and we would take the watermelons and just drop them on the ground. With our hands we could pull out the heart of the watermelon and leave the rest for the deer to eat. We'd all break one and my grandfather had so many of them, it didn't matter how many we ate. Hempstead watermelons are just out of this world.

I can remember chasing his chickens. He used to always fuss about it. He said, "When that boy leaves, my chickens don't lay eggs for a week". (Both laugh) We didn't have chickens that I could chase. When I got up there we had a ball.

GOODSILL: Now, what is her name? We didn't get her name.

RENFROW: You didn't get her name. Jenny Herring! Now the Herrings are...I'm trying to think of where they came from but I think I can find out. I'll see if I can find out where they came from.

GOODSILL: So you had all the amenities at the store, but -

RENFROW: ALL the amenities. Everything we needed at the store. When we'd go to my grandfather's they had an outhouse and they had a well. They got their water out of the well.

GOODSILL: All their drinking, all their bathing and all the water for the animals - from the well?

RENFROW: All the water for the animals came from a pond that was filled with the overflow rain on the lake. My grandfather was a rancher, too. He had cattle. I can remember going up and they had an outhouse and we'd say "This is fantastic!" It was just unbelievable. She'd cook on a wood stove. She'd bake sugar cookies and things like that – on a wood stove. Just unbelievable. She cooked divinity candy she could make the best divinity candy, right on the stove.

I can remember – I might choke up on this – I can remember when my dad decided to give them a bathroom (long pause)

GOODSILL: Because they were so grateful? Because it changed their lives?

RENFROW: Yeah (whispered, with emotion) and just like me, she cried. Why in the world would you cry over a bathroom? I was just a kid, you know? I can remember that.

GOODSILL: But imagine – running water, a mirror indoors? Flushing? Oh.

RENFROW: Oh, yeah, they had to take one corner of a bedroom and put in the bathroom. But that's the kind of dad that I had.

GOODSILL: That was a quality of life gift. Like the homes that he helped you to buy. Quality of life.

RENFROW: It's just unbelievable. Yeah.

GOODSILL: They were at an age where, probably, it was getting hard to do things. That luxury is wonderful. That's a good story. So you were kind of close to those grandparents, your mother's parents?

RENFROW: Oh yeah, we were. In fact, at that time they moved down and my dad had a rent house in Fresno and they moved into it so that parents took care of them. My dad brought my grandfather's cows to Fresno and took care of them until he passed away. That gave my grandfather a little income. My grandfather was an unbelievable gardener. He would take a portion of the property where he lived and he'd work in that garden.

GOODSILL: What would he grow?

RENFROW: Carrots, tomatoes, squash, cucumber, everything he could – just a little small garden.

GOODSILL: For his use? Cooking use?

RENFROW: Yes, yes. Just for his use.

GOODSILL: And grandma would cook?

RENFROW: And grandma would cook. She was a cook. She really was. She was a good cook and of course when they came down here they didn't have the wood stove. I don't know if she ever had anything but a wood stove until they moved to Fresno.

GOODSILL: I wonder if she liked the new electric, or if she missed the wood stove?

RENFROW: You know, I never heard. I've been there a lot to eat breakfast with them. She would always cater to us. The dairy was right behind their rent house, so when we finished our morning chores she insisted on fixing us breakfast. She never did complain.

GOODSILL: Well, this is a very good caricature of what life was like for your parents and your grandparents. It encapsulates aspects of living that kids these days don't know about.

RENFROW: Oh, they don't. They don't know. They just – we're just living so fast now.

GOODSILL: So fast! And so many conveniences. We don't even think what it might have been like to go out and pull your own water. Grow your own vegetables. Butcher your own animals.

RENFROW: Yes. I can remember my grandparents, when they lived in Navasota, they did not have any grass in their yard. Any time some grass would start growing my grandparents would pull it up. They pulled and it was just nothing but dirt. Then they lined their yard with upside down glass drinking bottles of all different colors.

GOODSILL: Grass is just a total, modern-day luxury; it takes a lot of water and it doesn't produce anything.

GOODSILL: Okay, I have a question related to your father. When you'd go out in the field and he'd pick the calf and then he'd take it and butcher it, where do you shoot it?

RENFROW: In the head.

GOODSILL: So it doesn't get pellets or bullets or anything in the organs?

RENFROW: Doesn't ruin anything. He would take it to the store, or behind the store, and we'd butcher it and save the hides. Salt them down, save the hides, and then we'd sell them once a year, and that was mother's little “kitty” that she had for vacations.

GOODSILL: What did you sell them for? I mean, why did people buy them?

RENFROW: For leather. We'd just salt down the hides and it smelled. It was horrible. Of course, that's the reason, I guess, the government came in and said we can't do it anymore. It would smell like you wouldn't believe. We'd take the hides into town and sell them. They would make leather goods out of them.

GOODSILL: Yes. So it's interesting that you remember the government making regulations. Did that change your father's business?

RENFROW: No, no. He just started purchasing carcasses of inspected calves from a market in Houston. He could still buy and butcher, but the carcass had to be certified. So he'd go to the killing plant and he'd pick out the carcass.

GOODSILL: Did your grandfather Clyde also do his butchering?

RENFROW: No, no, no he didn't.

GOODSILL: I wonder how your father learned how to do that.

RENFROW: I don't know, but he was an unbelievable butcher. And kind of self-taught. He would sharpen his own knives. He even had all the machines for grinding meat and use them to butcher the carcasses.

GOODSILL: And he knew how to fix all the machines, too, I bet.

RENFROW: He'd take care of 'em, yeah. He was pretty frugal. He was pretty sure about everything. I can remember in the service station that the boys would put gas in their cars. I was trying to figure out the price on gas then. I remember when it was twenty nine cents a gallon. I can remember when they had the gas wars – when the tax on the gas was more than the gas.

GOODSILL: Well, so where did you go to school?

RENFROW: I went to E. A. Jones Elementary. Then I went to Missouri City Junior High. Then I went to Missouri City High School 'til Sugar Land and Missouri City consolidated in 1959 and became John Foster Dulles (High School). After consolidation they started building the Dulles (High School) campus.



Dulles High School Sr./Jr. prom left-to-right: Bill Broughton ('62), Donna Christopher ('63), Ray Miller ('62), Pat Schiller ('65), Thomas Wood ('63), B. J. Binford ('61), C. T. Renfrow ('62), & Sherry Blackburn ('62).

--courtesy <http://wateringholdclubhouse.blogspot.com>

In 1962, at midterm, we moved to the new building there at the Dulles campus. At that time it was one building. It had the cafeteria, the gym and one building for classes, which later on became the administration building. We went there our senior year and we were the first graduating class of John Foster Dulles at the new school. We got to go to the new school at Dulles.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the interview for B. J. & Jon Pitts on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=48874>

GOODSILL: Was that exciting?

RENFROW: I was very excited going into a brand new school. We won the district football championship with the football team, so we were pretty big shots even then. And then to be able to move into the new school, it was exciting.

GOODSILL: How many people were in your graduating class?

RENFROW: 88.

GOODSILL: Were you a pretty close group?

RENFROW: Oh, yes. I grew up with three cousins when I was in Fresno. They all lived in Fresno. My same age. We were all born within four months. It was Dot Woodfin, then there was Linda Faye Barnes, and Linda Renfrow.

We had two born in September, one born in November (that was me), and one was born in December. But we were all born within four months. We went to school together; rode the same bus. We were a pretty tight knit group for a long time. Everyone knew that we were all related.



Dulles High School Class of 1962 at their 50th Reunion. Front row, C. T. Renfrow & John Henry Martin. Back row Richard Norman, Ray Miller, Rusty Moffett, & Bill Broughton.

- -courtesy <http://wateringholdclubhouse.blogspot.com>

All of our family went to the same church. The whole congregation was mostly all our relatives and neighbors. We went to the Methodist Church for many, many years; a little wood building. They built a brick building, a nice building. Now it's grown too. The church has moved to Sienna. It's a big Methodist Church right there off of Sienna Boulevard.

GOODSILL: Fresno kind of got bypassed over time? Tell me how that happened?

RENFROW: It was kind of bypassed. We were all transported to Missouri City. They always picked us up and the principal would always kid us, saying, "We're going to pick the Fresno people up at the metropolis of Fresno, the Renfrow Grocery." The whole town was contained within itself. It wasn't that big an area, but we serviced the whole town of Fresno.

GOODSILL: Everybody shopped there. Everybody bought their groceries there. Everybody got their dry cleaning. Whatever needed to be done, you guys provided it.

RENFROW: Yeah. The dry cleaning – they had a service that would come pick up at the store. So anybody that wanted to drop their dry cleaning could do so at the store.

GOODSILL: Was your dad particular about what you boys wore?

RENFROW: I don't remember him restricting us until we went to church. When we went to church he made us dress up. And I mean, even when we were kids – young – we'd have to wear a suit, or have to wear something like that. Today, when I go to church and all the people are dressed in jeans, and some in shorts, it's really unbelievable. I'm very uneasy about it. I do go without a coat and tie, but I wouldn't wear shorts. I guess that comes from my raising.

GOODSILL: Well I know someone from another town, in Oklahoma actually. She said, "We always wore our best clothes because my daddy said if you're going to face the lord, you want to be wearing the best thing you have."

RENFROW: Yeah. We were taught to respect the church and to respect the people in the church. And to respect our customers. And so we respected all of them.

GOODSILL: And you learned pretty strict manners, too.

RENFROW: Yeah, we were polite. We'd say, "Yes, ma'am?" and "No, ma'am."

GOODSILL: Did you learn anything at school that helped you with the career that you eventually went into?

RENFROW: Well, I got an athletic scholarship. But my mother had an accident. She was thrown off a horse about the time I was fixin' to go to school they asked me not to go to school and not to take the scholarship. She had a concussion and broke some ribs. It was a pretty traumatic time. My brother Bob had taken an athletic scholarship and he went through a pretty rough time. He had to leave school about the same time my mother got hurt.

As far as how my education helped me, I always liked chemistry. I studied chemistry in school. My first job was with Diamond Paint company. I became a lab technician. Started learning and went to school for them. I learned as much as I could about paint manufacturing until I went into sales with NAPKO.

A friend of mine asked me if I wanted to work for the *Houston Chronicle*, and at twenty one I went to work for the *Chronicle* and I worked for them for 45 years as an independent distributor. I managed the Memorial area district, zip 77024. Town and Country, which serviced 4,000 customers. I managed the area.

GOODSILL: What's involved? I've never talked to anybody who had a job like that?

RENFROW: I managed a warehouse. Independent contractor, trucking of materials, and payroll.

GOODSILL: Full time employees? Or part time?

RENFROW: They were part time because we delivered newspaper in the wee hours of the mornings. When we bought *The Post* we delivered all newspapers in the mornings. We worked from about two a. m. to six a. m. in the mornings, taking care of the customers. As a *Chronicle* distributor, we delivered in the afternoon.

GOODSILL: Did you own the vehicles?

RENFROW: Yes, we owned the commercial vehicles for product pickup.

GOODSILL: And the warehouse?

RENFROW: I didn't OWN the warehouse, I leased it.

GOODSILL: You had the warehouse, you owned the vehicles. What else is involved in that business? You have the carriers.

RENFROW: We had carriers but they were independent contractors responsible for timely delivery every day.

GOODSILL: Payroll.

RENFROW: After we purchased the *Post* I had to do payroll about twice a month. During the time when I was with the *Chronicle* I had the afternoons pretty free. My father-in-law was working in Alaska and he was in construction and I told him, "Hey, come on back to Houston. We'll start our own construction business and build houses." We started building and remodeling houses during that time. We were in the construction business together, We built and remodeled houses in Sugar Land, Sugar Creek, Missouri City, Stafford, Houston, Austin, Missouri City, and in Galveston.

GOODSILL: How did you know how to do that?

RENFROW: At that time, my father-in-law was the one responsible for construction knowledge and I was responsible for financing. We built the home for the president of Sugar Creek National Bank, and he did a lot of our funding.

GOODSILL: Your dad must have been proud of you!

RENFROW: Yeah, he was. He was pretty proud. He always would say I was working too much.

GOODSILL: Yeah, well the apple doesn't fall far from that tree! (laughs)

RENFROW: I had a good teacher. We also had an Amway distributorship for many years. We became direct distributors. Of course, I was trained in customer relations and so I got along with people. Always had the gift of gab, you know? Old timers when they'd come in and sit in the store, they wanted to just sit around and talk, you know? There's a lot of old stories that we could come up with and we would visit with them.

GOODSILL: It's a very uniquely Texan life, too.

RENFROW: Yeah. Small town. We didn't have anything to do. There was nothing. No movie theater, no entertainment. My dad kind of kept a pretty close eye on all of my buddies, all of my friends. We didn't get in trouble in Fresno because dad was the resident deputy for Fort Bend County. We might play basketball, football, baseball, or horse shoes or we might play games or do things like that, but if we wanted to get in trouble we had to come to Sugar Land because that's where the movie theater was and the Dairy Queen. And we usually drove on dirt roads. Dulles had a dirt road when we moved into the new high school building – farm land on both sides. There's subdivisions there now, but I can remember corn fields on both sides of the road when you drove down Dulles. Both of my kids graduated from Dulles and they had over 800 in their graduating class. Boy, times have changed.

GOODSILL: And you had eighty...

RENFROW: 88. Now they've got ten or fifteen schools that have broken away from Dulles.

GOODSILL: What are your children's names?

RENFROW: Suzette Renfrow Armatage, she's an Aggie. She graduated from A&M and now lives in Dallas. Then Rod Renfrow who graduated from the University of Houston and lives in Missouri City. They've been very successful, doing very good.

RENFROW: My second wife, Kathy Franklin, came from Michigan. She moved here and raised three sons, two went to Dulles, one to Willowridge. I met Kathy because my son, Rod, and her son, Gabe Raymond, were real good friends at Dulles. She lived next door to my brother and I finally met her and then we got married and now we've got five kids between us. Eleven grand kids.

GOODSILL: Oh, that makes it great, doesn't it?

RENFROW: Oh yeah, yeah. We're getting ready for a big Christmas.

GOODSILL: At what point in your life did you move away from Fresno?

RENFROW: In 1969 I moved to Sugar Creek into one of the houses that we built.

GOODSILL: Let's go back and finish up the story of your parents. Your parents – the last time we knew them they were thriving and running the business – every business – in Fresno. Then your mom had her accident. What happened as your parents got older?

RENFROW: My dad was still active in the store. He still had the store. My mother was still at the post office. When I was a junior in high school he sold the dairy business. It was kind of dying out – there were so many government restrictions. They were developing the land and it was getting more and more expensive. Then my uncle and my dad got out of their dairy business and started selling off their cattle, getting ready for retirement.

GOODSILL: I bet he never really retired.

RENFROW: Well, my dad turned over the store to my brother Bob before my dad passed away. Then mom and dad built a house on the property where the dairy was located. They moved their new home in probably 1969. Then Bob took over the store. My other brother, Al, was in the banking business and then the business in microfilm.

My brother Bob took over the store and operated it until he passed away. My sister Helen married John Hubenak from Alvin. He's in the insurance business. My brother-in-law, Ralph Senior, who married my sister Carolyn, was very active in the Arcola. They owned a western and tire store and service station in Arcola.

Carolyn and Ralph went to high school together and when they got out of school they got married. They still live in Sienna.

A lot of the property in Sienna had been the Seniors'. Kathy and I drove out there the other day, and it's unbelievable! I said, "Man, I wish my dad could come back and see what it is now". Because he'd patrol the dirt streets. How it's changed from like Sienna is now.



Bob Renfrow, was owner of the Renfrow Grocery Store and Gas Station after his father died.

GOODSILL: He would not believe it.

RENFROW: He would not. He would not believe it. We used to have a lot of the land for our dairy cattle, and a lot for our range cattle and we shared several acres with three of my uncles who also had large dairy and beef cattle. My uncle had a big dairy. So we had a big area. In fact, that land was just recently sold.

GOODSILL: What happened to all this land that you're describing?

RENFROW: It's all been developed now. It's all been sold. There are no more ranches out there, no more cattle. Pearland is just growing towards Fresno. It's taking over. A lot of the property that my dad used to have under lease is now Pearland. It's all BEING developed.

GOODSILL: Who ever knew? Your dad would be shocked at the population growth.

RENFROW: He'd be shocked at the population growth of Fresno. I mean, it's just grown like you wouldn't believe. You can go by there and you can't even recognize some of the houses that used to be there when we were there. They've either moved them off and come up with brick houses.

GOODSILL: Your story reminds me of Levi Strauss, who went out to the Gold Rush but didn't get gold. He decided he would sell provisions like jeans.

RENFROW: Jeans, yeah.

GOODSILL: It's kind of like, that's the story of what your family decided to do. They would sell provisions; milk, and all the dairy products and the grocery store and all the things that people needed in order to be able to live in a town.

RENFROW: Yeah. Now one thing that always was amazing to me is that when we would milk our cows, we'd have the raw milk. My dad would never drink the raw milk. He had a grocery store that had to pasteurize milk, we had the milk delivered. He'd have milk in the bottles but it was all pasteurized. He would not drink the raw milk.

GOODSILL: Did you all drink it?

RENFROW: We drank it. We didn't have it in the house. We didn't bring it to the house. But we'd drink it out of the tank. It'd be so cold, so creamy, it's unbelievable. Then they made homemade ice cream, and when they did, they would take the cream for the homemade ice cream off the big tanks. We used to do that quite a bit and we used a lot of those over ripe bananas and made banana ice cream. (Both laugh)

RENFROW: We lived good. We were attached to the store. We had anything that we wanted. If we wanted a sandwich, we could make a sandwich, because he had the loaf of bread, pressed ham, bologna, cheese, and when a customer said, "I want a pound of this", well, you'd have to cut it. When we would do that, you could go in there and cut whatever you wanted for a sandwich. My parents didn't mind us eating the meat or the vegetables or anything else with that. They kept an eye on us with our sweets.

To look back now, it was a good life. You don't realize what your parents really do for you until, I guess, they're gone. You look back and say, "We had a pretty good life." To be raised by two good Christian parents, you know? That PRACTICED it. To me, my dad was not a real affectionate person. He was more of a shake your hand guy. I wish I could do that over again. I'd give him hugs because I try to hug my son now, and I miss that. He was just such a pillar of the town and the deputy part and the men in the church and everything else. He wanted to be that strong individual. And he was, he was.

GOODSILL: Well, your stories are wonderful. Is there anything that we've forgotten to cover?

RENFROW: Al and Bob raised two calves for the Fort Bend County fair. They got, I don't think it was Grand Champion, but they got the big high ranking in the fair.

GOODSILL: They must have been proud of it. Your dad AND granddad must have been proud. BOTH granddads must have been proud.

RENFROW: Al and Bob spent a lot of time with the animals.

GOODSILL: I think you have to in order to make them really succeed.

RENFROW: We also had to spend a lot of time with our horses, you know? We took care of them, we had to brush them down, you know? Feed them. They were our bread and butter. We had to have the horses in order to work the cattle. All the farmers would help each other. During the summer time we would work one herd for one of our farmer relatives and then they'd come help us. That way they didn't have to pay anybody to come and help. My cousins and my other siblings we would come in and help in order to cut down on expenses.

GOODSILL: All of you boys and all your cousins and so on were all good riders?

RENFROW: Yeah, all good riders. All good horsemen. You had to be. That was your parent's way of life, you know? (long pause).

Oh, by the way, did you know Dulles was almost named Riverbend? They had three different names, Riverbend, Oyster Creek, or John Foster Dulles, that they came up with and it was put to a vote. All the people voted and they voted for John Foster Dulles.

GOODSILL: How long did it take to get from Fresno to Dulles, in your little bus on the dirt roads?

RENFROW: It would probably take thirty minutes. I guess we were the furthest. They picked up kids in Arcola and they'd come to Fresno and they probably Trammel-Fresno Road to to pick up more. Then they came back and picked up a few stragglers, and then travel a yeo-lane highway to Dulles.

I had two cousins and two cousins that were in the military. Then I had two uncles that were in the military. None of them were in combat. When they called me up for the draft in 1961, the Vietnam crisis, there were five people from Fresno, all the same age. They picked one of them. They didn't have the lottery at that time. They just called us up at age eighteen to register for the draft. I had spinal meningitis when I was a kid.

One of the doctors asked me if I had polio of the spine. I said, "No, I had spinal meningitis." Well at that time, this doctor thought that's what it was. He classified me as 1-Y, which is when the only time you go is when it's in our land. By the time they reclassified me I was married, and that was another deferment. I was in school, so that was another deferment. So I wasn't able to go.

GOODSILL: The one that went to Vietnam? What happened to him?

RENFROW: He was one of my neighbors. They sent him to Vietnam. He lost his whole platoon; he was the only one that survived. When he came back to the states, they were going to meet with him and honor him for his bravery. When he got here to the states he refused it. He said, "I want that to be given to the guys that lost their lives, not to me." He was a super guy and a good friend. He's still alive. He had one of the major companies out there in Fresno that his dad developed. It's an iron company.

GOODSILL: Good for him! That's a good story.

RENFROW: Yeah, it is. It's good. The little town of Fresno, you just wouldn't think.

GOODSILL: Thank you so much for coming in.

RENFROW: My pleasure.

Interview ends