

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Constance Ann Harris Seger**

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Interviewer: Roberta Terrell

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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12 Pages



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Transcript

TERRELL: Will you tell me your whole name and where you were born?

SEGER: Constance Ann Harris Seger born in Paris, Texas on June 25, 1943.

TERRELL: Were you born in a hospital or by a midwife?

SEGER: Hospital.

TERRELL: Do you know the names of your father's parents?

SEGER: My paternal grandfather was Hunter Pinkney Harris, who was born and lived his life in Fulshear, Texas. My paternal grandmother was Willie Amilee McKithan.

TERRELL: What kind of work did they do?

SEGER: My grandfather came home after the death of his father, to run the farm and continue to support his mother and younger brothers and sisters. He left Southwest University college in Georgetown, TX. to come home to be a farmer. My grandmother had been a schoolteacher and a piano teacher, but when she married him, she became the wife of a farmer and a mother, and she lived the rest of her life in Fulshear.

TERRELL: How many children did they have?

SEGER: They had three. My father, Hunter Pinckney Harris, Jr., was the eldest, born in 1913. His younger sister, Evalyn Harris, was born in 1914 and then nine or ten years later, the third child was born. She was named Billie Amilee Harris [married name Wendt].

TERRELL: What are your memories of visiting Fulshear when you were growing up?

SEGER: My grandparents lived in a house that encompassed an entire city block. It was bordered by Wilson Street, Second Street, Syms Street, and Third Street. The house is still there today. The front corner was on Wilson and Second Street. It used to be a white house with a red brick chimney and now it has a stucco exterior.



Sketch of grandparents' Fulshear house

Behind the house they had a little chicken coop/chicken yard. My grandmother would kill chickens for food. She had a vegetable garden up near the house and there was a little storage house where she and her friends did quilting. There were always quilts in there.

The rest of the block was a pasture and they raised sheep. There was always a small herd of sheep and there was a barn right in the middle of the pasture. The sheep used to go in the barn, and we called it the doo-doo barn, because of the sheep doo-doo in there.

[laughing] We'd go up in the hayloft and we'd swing out through the door on a rope and drop down on hay bales that we would position under the loft door. We played in there for hours. We also chased the sheep. My grandmother always had a lot of good food around. The bedrooms were tiny. There were two little bedrooms upstairs. She and my grandfather were down on the first floor. We loved those little bedrooms upstairs because they seemed so country-like. I grew up in New Orleans, which was real city life, so for all of us, the four in my family and my cousins, it was a great treat to be in the country.

We used to wander down to what we called the 'old dusty road' into the prairie, at the edge of Fulshear, which was quite a bit smaller than it is today. We used to catch horny-toads out there. I haven't seen them since I was a little child. We would catch them and I remember we took one home to New Orleans. Our friends were horrified. They thought we had brought home a dinosaur or something. (chuckles)

TERRELL: What were the names of your maternal grandparents?

SEGER: My mother, Katherine Lydia Pittenger, grew up in Austin. Her father was Dr. Benjamin Floyd Pittenger. He was the Dean of Education at the University of Texas. My mother's mother was Katherine Magdeleine Bickler. She was a granddaughter of a famous Texas painter, named Hermann Lungkwitz, who came to the Texas Hill Country from Germany in 1850, along with members of his family. His brother-in-law, named Richard Petri, was also a painter. They were quite well regarded and their paintings are thought to be very representative of the place and times and people. Their works may be found in museums as well as in the homes of their descendants.

TERRELL: Did your mother paint?

SEGER: No. My grandfather, Dr. Pittenger, was a hobbyist painter. My brother is a wonderful painter and one of my sons is a wonderful artist. I have an 11-year-old granddaughter who is just magnificent. I can't draw straight lines but these others have the gift.

Dr. Pittenger was at the University of Texas for his entire career. He was the Dean of Education for about 25 years. My grandmother was a housewife and mother.

Both my parents were from Texas. My father was also a doctor. It's been a family tradition – his great-grandfather, his grandfather, several uncles, and his son were all doctors. During the war my father never went overseas but served in the Medical Corps at different bases and ended up being stationed in New Orleans at LaGarde Army Hospital. He left his residency in Galveston to enlist, so when the war ended, rather than go back to Galveston; he stayed in New Orleans and completed his medical training there. We lived there until I was 14, when my parents decided to move back to Texas, where both sets of grandparents lived. So we moved to Houston. There were four kids in my family – I'm the oldest, then two boys, Hunter Pittenger Harris and Benjamin Pinckney Harris.

My sister, Laurie Madeline Harris, is 10 years younger than I am. My cousin has a daughter named Laurel, Billie Wendt's granddaughter. My grandmother couldn't tell them apart, so she'd call them Laur-ee and Laur-ell. In the family, these girls are still called Laur-ee and Laur-ell. Their names are so similar; this makes it easier to tell which one you are talking about.

TERRELL: When you moved to Houston, did you spend a lot of time out in Fulshear?

SEGER: I probably spent less time out here because I was a teen-ager and I was at school and hanging out with friends. My brother, Hunter, was a year behind me and a teenager. But Ben and Laurie came out here a lot. They became interested in riding and Daddy got them horses. They came out a lot on weekends, and rode. Laurie and Laurel, the two youngest cousins, spent a lot of time together, riding. My brother learned to hunt and to this day, he lives in Colorado out in the country. My sister, too, lives a very country life. My other brother and I live very city lives. They were more influenced by Fulshear than I was. I loved it and Hunter and I have good memories.

TERRELL: Did you learn how to garden or go horseback riding?

SEGER: No, I just played. I never warmed up to horses. We didn't have any opportunity to ride because we were all so young that it took supervision. All the grown-ups were busy. No, we didn't work. We weren't asked to work. It was a very idyllic childhood. We chased the sheep, we walked down the path and we'd sit around and talk, and maybe play cards.

TERRELL: Did they have cows?

SEGER: Oh, yes! Out on the farm but not at the house. Only the sheep and the chickens were at the house. The farm was down FM 1093, across the railroad tracks and maybe about 1-1/2 miles on the left side of the road, backing down to the Brazos River. It ended up being 4,000 acres. There were a lot of cattle, and they also grew cotton, and corn. Eventually they put in maize and maybe even some soy. Cotton was the big crop. They ran about 200-300 head of cattle and the horses that were required to work the cattle. The hands had little houses scattered around on the property. They and their families would have a fence around the house, with chickens.

TERRELL: What is on that land today?

SEGER: Today it is Fulbrook and Weston Lakes. [housing developments]

TERRELL: Do you have any children?

SEGER: Yes, I have three. My middle son, Christian Harris Seger, is a goat farmer in Waller, in the Field Store community. He and his wife, Lisa Peterson, and their children have a goat dairy (Blue Heron Farm) and they market artisanal goat cheese and sell it at the markets. They feed whey to pigs and they sell those pigs to different restaurants in Houston, who want what they call Parmesan ham. It's supposed to have a certain flavor.

My daughter is Katherine Niles Seger and she's married to Andrew Weber. He's from Houston and they started dating when she was 14. They live in New York City. He's a vice-president and COO of MacMillan Publishing. They have two little girls, Elizabeth Harris Weber and Sarah Ann Weber.

TERRELL: What are the major changes in the Fulshear area?

SEGER: The development all around the city and the tollway. We used to have to drive out Westheimer, which was driving through the countryside, with fields and cattle on either side or crops. Once you got not too far past Voss Road, you were in the country. It was beautiful. Then it just developed and developed, and the drive out here was taking an hour because you were driving through commercial and residential development. With the toll road we can get out here in about 30 minutes.

TERRELL: Do you visit out here often?

SEGER: I come often because I'm on the board of the Fulshear Cemetery. I'm the treasurer. I come out at least once a month to the cemetery. We have a regular meeting once a year, in October. But we're in touch with each other when anything comes up or needs to be decided. And if we decide we need to meet more often, then we do.

TERRELL: If you had to pick one vivid memory from your childhood, visiting Fulshear, what would it be?

SEGER: Chasing the sheep – being in the pasture and the barn. It was just so foreign to my life the rest of the year. My grandmother was very cute. She was attentive to us. She was always there. She had a cook. There was always food when we had a holiday dinner. Often we'd come to Texas for Christmas and we'd be at one grandparents' house or the other. We called them Papa and Mama Billie. But the Wendt children, the cousins, called them Mother Harris and Daddy Hunter. When we moved here, we stopped calling grandmother 'Mama Billie', and we started calling her Mother Harris. But we never stopped calling grandfather 'Papa'.

My grandmother always had a lot of people around. My grandfather had MANY brothers and sisters and they all grew up here. When she had a dinner, the dining room was filled with the grown-ups and the kids ate in the kitchen at a long table – the children's table. I remember the year there weren't enough people at the adult table, so she said that my cousin Evalyn Wendt who is my age, and my brother and I could sit with the adults. So the little kids ate in the kitchen but WE got to eat with the grown-ups.

TERRELL: What were the names of your grandfather's siblings?

SEGER: My great-grandfather who was the first Harris in this community, was Robert Locke Harris. He was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1838. His father was a doctor. His mother died when he was about six and his father died when he was about eight or ten. He had a stepmother who, when his father died, found foster homes for the children, with her married sisters. There were four children. One of her sisters was married to a man named Joseph Simonton. All this was in North Carolina. He was a cousin of the Simontons who had already come to Texas and were ranching and had a big spread at what is now Simonton, Texas, right down the road from here.

In 1853, a group of people from North Carolina decided to come to Texas and seek their fortune, more land, more freedom, and more opportunities. The Simonton's, traveling with a group of families, including the Huggins family, came in 1853 to the Richmond area. Robert Locke Harris was 13 at the time, traveling with the Simonton family.

We understand he drove a wagon and brought a painting of himself and his two older sisters. I think it was rolled up in burlap. That painting was kept and has been repaired and is now at my house. It was at my grandmother's house and then it was at my parents' house and now it's in my house. He was 10 to 12 years old in the painting. That's how he got here. He married Fanny Huggins who was a young girl, part of one of the families that traveled together. He became educated as a doctor. I think he went to Transylvania where his father had gone and then he went to medical school at Tulane.



Painting of Constance's paternal grandfather, Robert Locke Harris (r), circa 1853

When the Civil War broke out he served as a medical officer during the Civil War. He came back to Fulshear and married Fanny Huggins. They had two boys Eugene Augustus and Robert Dudley. Eugene became a doctor and practiced in Navasota, Texas. Robert became a doctor and practiced in Fulshear. The family called him Brother Bob. The community may have called him Brother Bob, or Doctor Bob. My great-grandfather, Robert Locke Harris, married a woman named Emma Quinn from Navasota, after Fanny died. She had a baby boy, Thomas S. Harris. She died after several years of marriage – maybe 2 years. She was killed in a gun accident. One of Robert's sons was cleaning a gun and it discharged and killed her. Her family took the baby. I don't know whether there was blame involved or whether there was nobody to take care of the baby. He died when he was about 3 or 4, I think. They are buried near Plantersville.

Then Robert married again to Sally Bright Holiday. They had nine children. So in total, he had twelve children. Two of those children became doctors. So four of his sons became doctors. In the third family, the first son was Edward Dimmitt Harris. I think Dimmitt came from the minister whose name is on the marriage certificate. The name Edward came from Edward Huggins, who was the brother of the first wife. The second baby was Yarborough and he didn't live very long. He's buried in Fulshear. The third was my grandfather, Hunter Pinckney Harris. Then Francis Wilson Harris, Titus Holiday Harris, Tennessee Margaret Harris, John Huggins Harris, Sally Bright Harris and the last is Joy Mary Harris.

Little Sally Bright was born in 1899. She died August 10, 1900, of malaria. There must have been a lot of water standing and a mosquito scourge. The first wife, Fanny, and fanny's mother died of malaria, all within a week. They were so frightened of it that the wife and the remaining children went to Galveston. I'm not sure how they got there, maybe by train. And they survived the Great Storm of 1900, in a rented house just two weeks after the baby had died. They went to the coast because the breezes blow the mosquitoes inland. Mosquitos were terrible on the prairie.

They were in this rented house in a neighborhood with lots of houses and during the hurricane they had to go higher up in the house, up to the top floor or maybe the attic. They tore sheets and tied the children by the waist, all together. A lot of people did that. There was a brick building next door, a synagogue. I've tried hard to identify where that might have been but I haven't found it. They thought they might be safer in that building, but the water was already high. They tried to push a ladder across to a window but it didn't work. In the morning the synagogue had collapsed. Most of the houses in the neighborhood were gone, but theirs was not.

TERRELL: It was a miracle!

SEGER: It was. My cousin, Evalyn, tells me that what she remembers our grandfather saying that he remembered most was the noise. How loud it was. How dark it was and how bad it smelled. He remembered that most of the houses around them were gone.

TERRELL: Did any of the men in your family have military experience?

SEGER: My father served in WW II. My great-grandfather served during the Civil War. They weren't military men. They were called up during a time of crisis. My husband's grandfather was career military and served with Pershing in WW I during the Armistice. He was an aide to Pershing. It was my husband's grandfather's watch that they used to synchronize all the generals' watches, then went back to their troops to signify when it was the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month to end the war. That watch still exists.

TERRELL: Too many people never ask their elders about their stories.

SEGER: Many of the people I have mentioned are buried in Fulshear, including my grandmother's father and my great-grandmother's mother. I have a great-great-grandmother also buried out there. Her name is Tennessee Ann Crawford Hunter. She is called Mrs. T. C. Hunter on her gravestone. Her father came to Texas in 1839 and she was born in Texas during the years of the Republic.

Our earliest immigrant to Texas in my family is John Crawford. He served in the War of 1812 and was at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend with Sam Houston. They were born in the same town, in the same year, in Virginia, in 1793. This is undocumented but strongly presumed. We have a friendship connection with Sam Houston through that man. They were contemporaries and moved from Virginia into the War of 1812, the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, and on to Texas.

TERRELL: How did the Harris' acquire their land?

SEGER: I think he got land when he could. Practicing medicine Robert Locke Harris probably couldn't support all those children on what he was making as a doctor. So he acquired land. I guess he bought it when he could. I don't know how people got land in those days.

TERRELL: Some go back to land grants.

SEGER: His did not because he came in 1853. But I DO know that he bought portions of the John Randon League. He bought it from the person who did get it as a land grant. Parcels of that land were known by the name of the original owner. Those were people who came with the Old Three Hundred, Stephan F. Austin's colony, which was the first settlement of Americans in Texas as part of the *empresario* program with Mexico.

I'll tell you a funny story. Daddy didn't want to be a doctor. He wanted to be a farmer. His dad told him he couldn't because there wasn't enough work here. It couldn't support two families and he needed to grow up, move away and make his own life. After he left the one room schoolhouse, he went to Galveston and lived with his grandmother so he could attend Ball High School. Then he went to Rice. After he graduated from Rice, he went to medical school in New York City and then came back to Galveston to do a residency. That's when he enlisted in WWII. During college he would come home during the summers and work on the farm. Judge Carl Bentley told me this story when I first went on the cemetery board a few years ago. He just died this year – he was 93! Good for him. He told me that my dad, Hunter, was his hero. “Hunter was about five years older than I.

One summer when he was home, during the drought (late 20s – early 30s perhaps), each night the hands would have to sleep at one of the wells on the property. The water table was so low that the well pump under the windmill could lose its prime and then it would go dry and there wouldn't be any water in the tanks for the stock. If the pump went down, the hand would hear it and re-prime it and start it again so the water would keep flowing.

Hunter was assigned to one of these jobs. So he would spend the night with his horse, out in the pasture somewhere, next to one of the wells. Hunter let me go with him when I was only 12 or 13 years old." Can you imagine a mother in today's world letting her 12 year old go out on the prairie and spend the night at a well with an 18 year old boy?! But she did.

Carl also told me that one night (and I remember Daddy telling this story), one of the guys out there working on the well, cut himself. He got caught in some kind of machinery and cut himself really bad in the groin/upper thigh area. This must have been after Daddy was in medical school or had some training. They went and got Hunter. Daddy took off his belt and put a tourniquet on him and they brought him in to town. Apparently the guy survived. He could have died if somebody hadn't known to do that. Daddy told me one time that he was under his house, emptying bullets into a little pile of gunpowder. And he lit it! And it puffed up into his face. He went running into the house and stuck his face in the dishwater in the sink. He singed his eyebrows and eyelashes. He was into mischief! He just lived on his horse. He got up, got dressed and got on his horse every day and went out to the farm to work or went to find a friend.

One of the stores in town was the Walker-Meier Dry Goods Store. My grandfather had a store, too, he and somebody else but I don't remember who his partner was. Papa's store was Harris-Something. It was down on the end of the street where you turn from FM-1093 onto FM-359. There was a little row of a red brick buildings. It was torn down about 20 years ago, I think. It was a dry goods store. It had wooden planks on the floor and cases that were glass. Just exactly like the store on Little House on the Prairie. When I watched that with my kids I would think, "That's JUST like his store!" And we'd go in and get candy. They had candy jars. We would say, "Charge it to my grandma" and walk out. We never paid for a thing in there! And it worked.

TERRELL: Was there a grocery store?

SEGER: No, there wasn't a grocery store. I'm sure the dry goods store sold salt and flour (staples). You had a garden. [My grandmother] must have loved eggplant or they were easy to grow. She always had an eggplant casserole as part of the meal. The meat came from a calf they killed out at the farm and she had her chickens. The sheep were sheared and they made wool blankets every year and she made quilts.

TERRELL: She made her own wool blankets?

SEGER: They sent the sheared wool out and had blankets made. They were dark green or dark red with a satin binding. Every year when we lived in New Orleans, at Christmas they would send us a quilt or a couple of blankets. All of us had blankets from the Fulshear sheep on our beds. And a HUGE big burlap bag of pecans. My grandfather had planted pecan trees in the pastures and they are still out there in Fulbrook and Weston Lakes. He harvested them every year, and he'd send us this great big burlap bag that sat about 'that' high [gestures]. I can remember we could shell pecans like nobody's business. We grew up learning how to do that. They were very nice presents, straight off the farm. I think that's what their whole life was – they lived off the land. They didn't go buy presents and they didn't go buy food.

At some point I think she got a freezer, but that was probably to keep the meat. She made something called 'tomato mess'. My mother loved it but I don't think I ever liked it. It may have had cucumbers in it and I never liked cucumbers. If it didn't have cucumbers, I probably ate it. My mother used to make it and she'd say, "We're having Mother Harris's tomato mess tonight." It was just chopped up tomatoes, fresh out of the garden; chopped up onions; maybe with cucumber and maybe not; and then just oil and vinegar. It was sort of soupy. You'd have to have it in a bowl. As I recall, you would serve it with a spoon, maybe a slotted spoon.

TERRELL: Those are really good memories!

SEGER: It was great. I cherish my memories of that, and I love this little town. I can still see the old little town in my mind even though there is so much that is new and has changed. The church used to be a little white building and it had a little porch on the front. I think you stepped up a couple of steps and had a porch across the front. The doors were two double doors and they opened up and there was a row of pews down each side. It wasn't very big. I bet it held maybe 50 people? Maybe not that many.



There was a little altar up at the front. I went to a lot of funerals there. I went to my grandmother's funeral there and she died in 1989. But they might have had just a graveside service. I know when my grandfather died and when Aunt Tennessee died and some of the older ones, it was in that old country church. It's a shame it's not still here. It's what a church in Fulshear should look like.

The post office was attached to a filling station, down on First Street – I mean FM-359. It wasn't a beautiful, great building with a flagpole in front of it.

It was just a sweet little town; a great place to visit. A lot of people want to be here. It's a place people seek out. I've really enjoyed the friends I've made through the cemetery board, with new families who are living out here. They've come because they like what Fulshear is. It's not caught up in the rat race of the big city.

TERRELL: Can you think of anything else?

SEGER: It's a wonderful family, starting with Dr. Robert Locke Harris, who was a very generous man and very interested in his community and very kind to everyone who came across his path, whether they were employees on the farm, neighbors in the town or as patients. He was quite revered. I think his family continue to be.

My father was also a doctor in Houston and he was VERY involved in community and public service and mental health issues. He was a psychiatrist. He was very interested in mental health for children and for families. Now my husband is on the board of a little therapeutic school that they named The Harris School after Daddy. He was very involved in trying to put it together and get it launched. He died right at the time it was 'going on line' so to speak. So my husband, Christian Seger, is active in that.

Of course, Billie and Jack Wendt have made many important contributions to their community in Richmond. It's just been an ethic in the family to do good where you can and help your community, to be someone that your neighbors appreciate and that you appreciate them. It's a legacy to be proud of and I feel proud of all of them.

Interview ends