# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: Joseph P Court

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Interviewer: Diane L Ware

Transcriber:

Project / Group: Missouri City Gymnasium Oral History Project

Location: Commissioner Grady Prestage's Office 10 Pages

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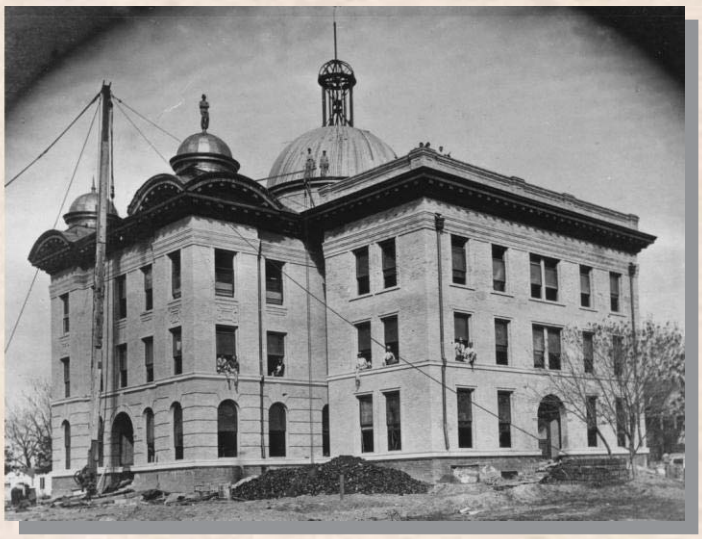
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## *Transcript*

**WARE:** Mr. Court, first I'm going to ask you to read the history that you brought with you.

**COURT:** In the year 2020, we laughed, we cried, and we Zoomed. But we made it! We are now here to remember our glory days at Missouri City High School.

For those who do not know me, my name is J. P. [Joseph Patrick] Court, Class of 1948. My graduation class had 34 students in it. To my knowledge, 26 are deceased. This [Missouri City/Landmark Community Center] gym has been transformed since I played basketball here. Even though it has changed and is totally different, I will never forget the basketball games I played on this court. Nor can any of us forget the senior prom we had here, and the grand music came from an old jukebox.

I have brought with me information and pictures that I have and the athletic memories and accomplishments and I plan to leave them. I'm not sure what more I can say as each of us have our memories, and I hope we can all share those memories with each other tonight.

**WARE:** Thank you.

When and where were you born?

**COURT:** I was born at St. Joseph's Hospital in Houston, Texas, December 30, 1929.

**WARE:** When and where did you start school?

**COURT:** Started first grade at the old Missouri City school.

**WARE:** Did you go all the way through there?

**COURT:** All twelve years.

**WARE:** Did other family members attend the school?

**COURT:** Yes.

**WARE:** How many would you say?

**COURT:** Six – Seven – Eight.

**WARE:** A lot! Were you ever on any teams with your relatives, such as basketball or football?

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**COURT:** Oh, yes.

**WARE:** Who did you play with?

**COURT:** I had J. C. Court, who was a year behind me – he played with me.

**WARE:** Who was the best player?

**COURT:** J. P. Court! That article tells you the story there.

**WARE:** How did you get to school?

**COURT:** We had three school buses.

**WARE:** Who drove them?

**COURT:** One guy by the name of Shapetta, and I can't think of the other two.

**WARE:** Were they teachers in the school?

**COURT:** I think one of them was, but I'm not sure. I can't remember that.

**WARE:** What are your earliest memories of the Missouri City gymnasium?

**COURT:** The difference was that for senior prom, for our dance, the music was coming from an old jukebox. We danced around in the gym on the same floor that's there now.

**WARE:** Did you keep your shoes on?

**COURT:** Yes.

**WARE:** So they weren't sock hops. You danced with your shoes on.

**COURT:** Yes.

**WARE:** When you went to school, did you eat lunch at school or did you bring your lunch?

**COURT:** Sometimes we brought our lunch, but sometimes we'd eat at the cafeteria. And they had a little hamburger [stand] across the street and we would go there and get hamburgers. I'm trying to think of the name of the lady who ran it.

**WARE:** Was the cafeteria part of the gymnasium?

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**COURT:** Yes, the front part. The front part was a cafeteria.

**WARE:** Describe how the gymnasium was laid out.

**COURT:** You had a walkway from the school into the gym, to the side of the gym. You also had a walkway in the back of the gym. The girls had their locker room between where we walked and the gym. For the boy's locker room, you walked in on the other side, the same way like it is now, but we came in from the street and out.

**WARE:** Tell me about the sports you were involved in.

**COURT:** I played football, basketball, and ran track. We didn't have baseball.

**WARE:** Did a lot of the students play many sports?

**COURT:** Not all of us.

**WARE:** Which was your favorite?

**COURT:** Football and basketball.

**WARE:** Describe your coaches.

**COURT:** Oh God. The last coach we had was Font Wade. He played football at Texas A&M. He was a fullback. Before him, we had E. A. Jones; he was the Principal. But he was our coach and he came out of the Navy.

**WARE:** He was the coach at the same time he was the Principal?

**COURT:** Yes. Part-time.

**WARE:** And these were your football coaches?

**COURT:** If they were a coach, they coached everything, including track.

**WARE:** So one coach for all the sports. That's a lot of work.

Did you ever play a musical instrument?

**COURT:** I started out with Leon Scarcella in elementary school with the clarinet. I was doing well until I was a freshman in high school. I was a pretty good-sized boy and the coach wanted me to come out for football. When I told Mr. Scarcella that I was going out for football, he'd have liked to wrap that clarinet around my head it

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made him so mad. He had worked so hard with me. [Leon's son] Leonard Scarcella was my cousin, the Mayor [of Stafford] who just died. But back then, I was about as big as boys were made so the coach wanted me for football.

Leon Scarcella was the band director at Missouri City High School the whole time I was there.

**WARE:** Did he teach any other classes?

**COURT:** Nothing but music, and he did that very well.

**WARE:** Did any of your brothers or sisters play in the band?

**COURT:** My wife, Betty Sue Wootten Court, was a drum major. She was behind me in school. She was my high school sweetheart. That is a long story to tell, but I'm going to tell you quickly.

She went to Sugar Land High School, who we hated at that time. But when [her family] moved, she started at Missouri City High School. The day the new students came in that front door, all us football players were watching. And I saw her and I told those boys, "She's mine. If any of y'all ever touch her, I'll break your neck." And that is a true love story. We've been married 71 years.

**WARE:** So Sugar Land had some good things after all? (Laughter)

You said that Sugar Land was your arch rival?

**COURT:** Amen! They were.

**WARE:** How so?

**COURT:** We couldn't stand them. Kenneth Hall was after me. But [Charlie] Tise played with them and we've stayed good friends. Richard Fogg played on the team. The field that we played on in Sugar Land [Kempner Stadium] still stands over there, by the church. I'm unable to name some of the others, but they were our enemies. They played 11-man football. When I went in as a freshman, we were a 6-man football team. We went to 11-man football in my sophomore year, I think. And that's when we started playing Sugar Land. We were a smaller school than Sugar Land. Class B I think we were.

**WARE:** So they had a better football team. What about basketball?

**COURT:** They were very good. They always had a good basketball team.

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**WARE:** Was the Sugar Land gymnasium as good as yours?

**COURT:** No! Our gymnasium was rated so highly that Rice Institute played a big game in our gym. Our gym held more people. I think we had one of the largest gyms for a high school.

**WARE:** Was the gymnasium ever open in the summer when school wasn't in session?

**COURT:** Yes.

**WARE:** How did you use it in the summer?

**COURT:** We come in and sign in, and we go in and work out for a few hours. We didn't have cars then so we'd run there and back. After our football practice, after we took our showers, we'd run all the way from Missouri City to Stafford.

**WARE:** Wow. No bus?

**COURT:** My senior year, I was 6 feet ¾ inches and I weighed 186 pounds. In those days, that was a good-sized man. If I lose a few more pounds, I'll be my high school weight.

**WARE:** Don't do that! (Laughter)
Were you the biggest person on the football team?

**COURT:** I was one of the biggest. Weight-wise I wasn't. Some were overweight and played on the line, who weighed more than I did.

**WARE:** What position did you play?

**COURT:** I played both ways. I was All-District defensive end two years in a row.

**WARE:** You talked about the fact that the gym was used for other things than basketball games. What other things happened in the gym?

**COURT:** Volleyball. They played a lot of volleyball in our gym. We had ping pong tables. I guess that was about it.

**WARE:** What about social events in the gym?

**COURT:** The stage is still in the same location and we had social events. The chairs would all be lined up on the basketball court. Everybody would get on the stage. The front stage is still standing.

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**WARE:** Did they have plays?

**COURT:** Oh, yes.

**WARE:** Do you remember any specific events there that were memorable to you?

**COURT:** At this time I can't remember any. There were just different plays that we had. The students that were taught in plays and taught play-acting were on the stage.

[E.F.] Patton was our superintendent. He was mean. He was a retired sergeant. He whipped us with a belt. He would tell us to grab our ankles and he would use a belt on us. And then, if that wasn't good enough, he had a belt line. Do you know what a belt line is? They lined all the high school boys up and down the field on each side and if he had caught you doing something bad, you had to run through there all the way down. That was called the belt line. I went through it twice. How he caught me wasn't very fair. He had his office up front with his own restroom. This particular day he chose to come down the hall and go in our restroom and use the last stool. You couldn't see who was in there. I came in and I started cussing. "Somebody had better get off that stool because something's fixing to happen." But I used different words. He got his little book out and wrote "next belt line." I got the belt line for that.

**WARE:** So everyone on that line had a belt? And you ran through that.

**COURT:** Yes. And that's the fastest I ever ran the 100-yard dash in my life. He was very tough. In those days you could get by with that. I had blisters for months on my buttocks. But I broke the speed record running through there!

One time, he changed the bus route. Missouri City [buses] came down Pike's Road and he changed it. A man named Cash had two daughters in the same grade as I was in, but they changed the bus line. So [Cash] had to start bringing them by car. That upset him so much that he came to our school, in the front, and all of us were in English class with the windows facing the street. He pulled up there and I said, "Uh oh." And there came Mr. Patton. They got in an argument and in a fist fight. We stood there and watched. Later Mr. Patton ran through the belt line with us for that. He took that on himself.

I remember the name of that cafeteria owner was Darrough. In fact, their daughter [Nan Darrough] is in my yearbook. She graduated with me. She's deceased.

**WARE:** So Mr. Cash — was that Frank Cash?

**COURT:** No, Frank Cash was his brother. Frank owned the property as you go across the street that runs right into Stafford. But his son, Frank, Junior, still owns that property and he owns that storage. That was his grandfather.

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**WARE:** That's interesting that Mr. Patton decided to run the belt line.

**COURT:** Let me tell you what. There were some boys who would turn the belt around and the buckle was on the other side.
He was tough and mean. He was sneaky. We'd be having classes and he would sneak in and peek. He was sneaky. He was a retired Army sergeant. But he was tough. He would be hanged now for doing that. But it made better people out of us. What can I say?

**WARE:** I hear you.

We've talked about different teachers and sports. In the gymnasium there were also dances. Describe what the dances were like.

**COURT:** As I said, there was a jukebox. Sometimes our orchestra would come up with Leon Scarcella and they would play. But most of it was jukebox.

**WARE:** Did you have your prom there?

**COURT:** Oh, yes. Our Senior Prom. Sometimes they called it the Junior-Senior Prom. But this was the Senior Prom in 1948.

**WARE:** Did they have other dances there?

**COURT:** Oh, yes.

**WARE:** What other times of the year did they have dances in the gym?

**COURT:** I can't remember that. But we had other dances, yes.

**WARE:** I can't think of anything else we need to talk about. Can you think of anything at all that I've forgotten to ask you about? Okay. Thank you very much.

[Pause]

**WARE:** You were telling me about a basketball game.

**COURT:** One of my best memories — and I was a fair basketball player — we had a tournament at Addicks. I worked at Mrs. Baird's Bread Company on the weekends for money. And we were to play in the tournament that Saturday and Coach Wade said, "J. P., we can beat all of those teams and we're going to win the tournament. And I want you there. We're going to play two games. If we're in it, can I call you to come and play in that last game?" I said, "Yes Coach, you can."

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I get the call. My uncle drove me to Addicks and I played in that game that night. I can't tell you what happened to me because I wasn't that great. They always put me on the best player to guard him. I couldn't dribble, I couldn't shoot, but they always put me on the best player. That evening, in that final game, I got hot and I don't know why. They voted me the outstanding player and I got a gold basketball. The Ruffeno boy [Anthony P. Ruffeno] wanted to kill me because he was an excellent basketball player. I gave my wife that gold basketball, but what happened to it I don't know.

And getting back to her, that's a true love story. The day that she walked in that front door at the high school, [I knew] she was mine. I walked her down to the locker room and we'd talk every day. It got warmer and warmer all the time. So when we graduated, we got married. And now we've been married 71 years. I have two boys: Ron Court, 68 years old and Greg Court, 65 years old. They both have done very well. Went to college and got degrees. My younger son still lives in Bryan/College Station; has 130 acres, 30 head of cattle, with building/engineering degrees.

**WARE:** And they are Aggies.

**COURT:** Aggies. We love the Aggies. I graduated from Texas A&M Police Academy in 1953, in criminology. And I attended the Northwestern University at the Houston Police Academy and graduated from there in criminology.

**WARE:** And how many years did you serve as Police Chief in Bellaire?

**COURT:** I was only in Bellaire for 10 years. When they offered me that job, I was Assistant Chief of Police and I didn't want it because I was making more money as an Assistant Police Chief. I had extra jobs. Gary Summers was our city manager and I never will forget being in his office and he said, "J. P., the Mayor and Council want you. They see something inside you that you don't see." He told me that. I took the job. I was the youngest Police Chief in the state of Texas. But I was Chief for only two years because I wasn't making any money. So I took early retirement and went into the floor covering business. And that's where I stayed until I retired, and that's where I made my money.

**WARE:** Very good. Thank you.

(Pause)

**COURT:** I was Deputy Sheriff of Fort Bend County.

**WARE:** Sheriff Troy Nehls made you an honorary deputy sheriff?

**COURT:** Yes.

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I still have the badges but he's no longer there. His brother, Trever Nehls, was a constable in Precinct 4. He ran for sheriff and he lost. Troy was on television just this last week. He filled that office with so many people when they put me up at the front desk as he left. I had badges and IDs. I could go anywhere in the Fort Bend County Jail or the office or anywhere. That is no longer possible. He made me Sheriff for the day.

Going back to Bellaire, they still remember me. They built the new police station a few years ago and I was invited. There were 50-70 people there. I was in the middle. It was sad that my wife didn't get to go with me that day because she was sick. I was shocked. The Chief stood up and said, "I'm going to introduce you to a man who was Police Chief here in the City of Bellaire before you were born." He said, "Chief Court, would you stand?" I stood up and got a standing ovation. I get a Christmas card every year. The Chief there and I are good friends.

**WARE:** That is wonderful.

**COURT:** What more can I say?

**WARE:** I appreciate it. Thank you for sharing for us.

**COURT:** That high school sweetheart – that got you, didn't it? She was the cheerleader in high school.

**WARE:** It did.
So there was one group of cheerleaders for all the sports?

**COURT:** Yes.

**WARE:** Thank you, Mr. Court.

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