

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: DONALD GENE DRACHENBERG

Interview Date: 01/23/2023

Interviewer: Karl Baumgartner

Transcriber: Sylvia Vacek

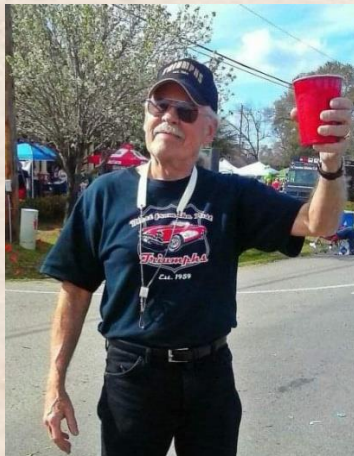
Location: Rosenberg, Texas



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BAUMGARTNER: Today is October 4, 2022; my name is Karl Baumgartner, and I am conducting an oral history interview with Don Drachenberg in Rosenberg, Texas. This interview is being conducted on behalf of Fort Bend County Historical Commission, Oral History Project.

Don is a lifetime resident of Fort Bend County and has been active in the community throughout his life. He was a high school teacher for sixteen years and founded a local business, which he ran with his wife, Doris, for many years. In addition, he was one of the original founders and leaders of the popular local band, The Triumphs and played in the band for over fifty years.

BAUMGARTNER: Don, what is your full legal name?

DRACHENBERG: My full legal name is Donald Gene Drachenberg. And there are only two people I can recall that ever called me that in my life. My dad always called me Donald Gene, and my sister called me Donald Gene.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you have other siblings?

DRACHENBERG: My sister, Karen Sievers, is five years younger than me, and my brother Rick is ten years younger.

BAUMGARTNER: What is your date of birth?

DRACHENBERG: April 15, 1942. I was born here in town, at the old Rosenberg hospital.

BAUMGARTNER: On Avenue H, at Highway 90 right across from the former First National Bank building.

DRACHENBERG: Yeah. My parents were living out west of town, in Taverner at that time, and my dad was teaching school there in a one room schoolhouse.



Don with his parents and siblings in the 1960s.

BAUMGARTNER: You were growing up when he was teaching school?

DRACHENBERG: I'm not sure of the exact dates but it was a school with several grades. For a while he served as elementary principal in Needville. He took the principal job because he was asked to by a real good friend, and then, interesting enough, he ended up quitting the principal position and going back to the classroom in the same school where he was principal because he missed the classroom teaching.

BAUMGARTNER: What was your dad's name?

DRACHENBERG: R.B. His full name was Richard Burnet Drachenberg, but he went by the initials R. B. When he was principal, my mom, Alice, was like his assistant or secretary. She was a volunteer. She never got paid, but she and my dad ran the school and ran the cafeteria.

BAUMGARTNER: That's exceptional. What a different era! Did you know your grandparents?

DRACHENBERG: My dad's parents were farmers in Taverner. My granddad's name was Julius Drachenberg. He laughed a lot, always stayed in a good mood, quiet, not conversational. Grandmother's name was Glody Walzel. She died in 1945.

My grandparents on my mom's side lived in Oregon.

BAUMGARTNER: Were your grandparents German or Czech?

DRACHENBERG: Both German.

BAUMGARTNER: So where did you grow up and go to school?

DRACHENBERG: Needville. It was a wonderful place to grow up.

But I think maybe I would have answered that differently when I got to be a teenager. Because a lot of times when I was in Needville, I always wished I lived in Rosenberg.

Rosenberg had a movie theater; it had a swimming pool. There were restaurants in Rosenberg, the Texas Grill and Larry's Mexican Restaurant. Needville didn't have

anything. When I was there, there wasn't a Little League. There wasn't even a Scout troop.

BAUMGARTNER: There couldn't have been a thousand people back then.

DRACHENBERG: I think it was like 500 or 600. What we did gain in Needville, which was really a big-time deal, they built a swimming pool. I think it was my last two summers there, before I went off to college. I worked at the swimming pool, not as a lifeguard, but at the concession stand and in the front selling tickets. Of course, at that time it was private.

BAUMGARTNER: This was back before integration, I guess.

DRACHENBERG: You had to become a member to swim there. The fee was very nominal, but that's how they kept things.

OFF TO COLLEGE

BAUMGARTNER: Did your dad encourage you to go on to college?

DRACHENBERG: You know, I don't even know. I think it was by osmosis, I would say, because my dad and his brothers all went to college. They went to Sam Houston State in Huntsville, and the next thing I knew, it was the end of my senior year in high school, and I had to make some kind of decision.

So, I went to Sam Houston. It wasn't something I had aimed at for years, and I really didn't know what I wanted to do back then. You know what I mean? You didn't really know. Now kids need to be more geared, and I think you've got to have things a little more planned out.

BAUMGARTNER: What was college like? How did you like it?

DRACHENBERG: I just kind of plodded through, but after a couple of years, I decided I wanted to become a teacher. My dad had been a teacher, and his brother had been a teacher, and a sister had been a teacher.

BAUMGARTNER: What do you major in?



Don with other Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity officers at Sam Houston University in 1964. At upper right is Chet Flippo, future head of Billboard Magazine and Country Music Television. At lower left is Chuck Maiorana (deceased), who is in the Texas Baseball Hall of Fame as the winningest high school coach in Texas. At lower right, Bill Zedler, is currently a Republican member of the Texas House of Representatives in Austin. All were Don's close friends even after their university days.

DRACHENBERG: History. I liked history so much. My dad and his brothers were big history buffs.

BAUMGARTNER: When did you graduate?

DRACHENBERG: 1965. After I got my bachelor's degree, I stayed on and taught freshman classes for two years there while I was on a fellowship to get a master's degree. When I got my master's, I planned to go into college teaching because I got the bug when I had those classes at Sam.

JOINING A HIGH SCHOOL BAND

In the meanwhile, since my senior year at Needville in high school I had become

involved in a dance band and was pretty focused on that.

BAUMGARTNER: Tell me a little about how your band involvement began.

DRACHENBERG: I played in high school band all through high school. I was already playing saxophone. During the last few months of my senior year, some Rosenberg guys approached me about joining them in a band.

The players were all from Lamar High School except me. Tim Griffith was one of the original guys. When Tim was, let's see, I was 17, he would have been 15. When Tim was 15 years old, in the summer of 1959, his dad bought a guitar and amplifier from someone who needed the money, and he brings it home and gives it to Tim. Tim started messing with the guitar and amplifier, and that's really how the thing got started. He ended up palling up with Teddy Mensik, and then Teddy bought a set of drums, and Denver Zatyka bought himself a guitar. Before long they asked me to join, and then BJ Thomas. We named the group The Triumphs.

BAUMGARTNER: OK, that was the beginning. We'll come back and return later to talk about the history of The Triumphs.

DRACHENBERG: Anyway, from that little beginning we started playing in dance halls and I went off to college and started playing with the band every weekend.

BAUMGARTNER: Is that how you met Doris?

DRACHENBERG: That's how I met my wife Doris, at a dance hall. The Triumphs had been playing together for over a year and we were playing one weekend in Lavaca County.

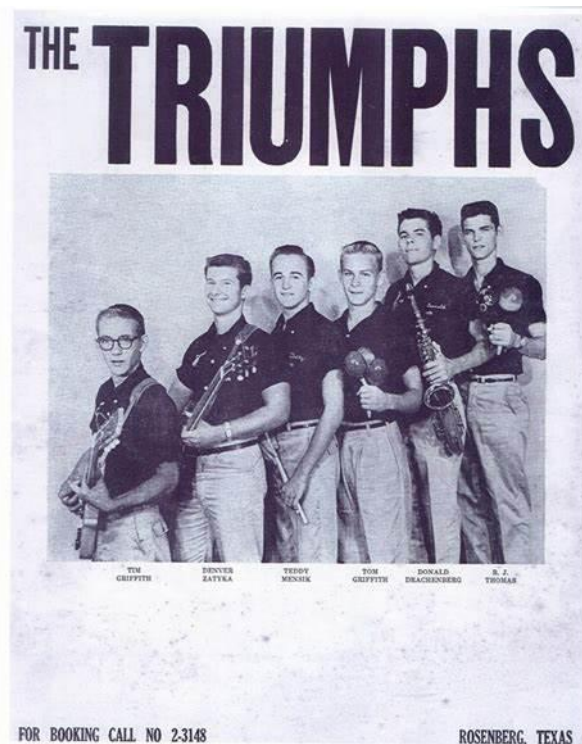
Doris was from Pasadena and still in high school and she was at a family reunion outside of Hallettsville. The kids were bored so four or five of them jumped in a car and came over to the dance in Hallettsville where we were playing. I met Doris during a break and chatted with her and got her name, address and phone number. One day several months later I was going through my wallet, and I found that piece of paper, and I was bored and wrote her a letter and one thing led to another and two years later we were married.

And that's how I met her.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. What a series of coincidences. I don't think people appreciate how much luck and circumstance changes the whole course of your life. People don't realize it, but, I mean, it's just a flip of a coin. Your whole life gets changed.

DRACHENBERG: It was 1964 by then; she was out of school and was working at a drug store in Pasadena and moved to Huntsville when we got married. After completing my master's degree in 1967 I started looking for a teacher's job. I put in what I thought was over 100 applications. I wanted to be close to Rosenberg so I could keep playing with The Triumphs.

Finally with my dad's help I got offered a job at Dulles High School. Right away Doris and I moved to Rosenberg and then moved into a house on Horace Mann Street



near the high school natatorium. We ended up buying the house from the guy that we were renting it from. And we've lived there ever since.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. Fifty years in the same house. Then what?

TEACHING

DRACHENBERG: I started a job teaching history at Dulles. I planned to do it for a year or two and move on, and then after the first year, I got hooked. You make friends on the faculty, and I liked the place. I mean, I liked the community. I liked the town. I liked the house and the location.

BAUMGARTNER: How long did you teach there?

DRACHENBERG: I taught there for fourteen years.

BAUMGARTNER: What was your teaching experience like?

DRACHENBERG: It was just fun. That's the first word that comes to mind. I taught American history.

BAUMGARTNER: Cool. That's an interesting topic and it's something you could really get some kids kind of interested in.

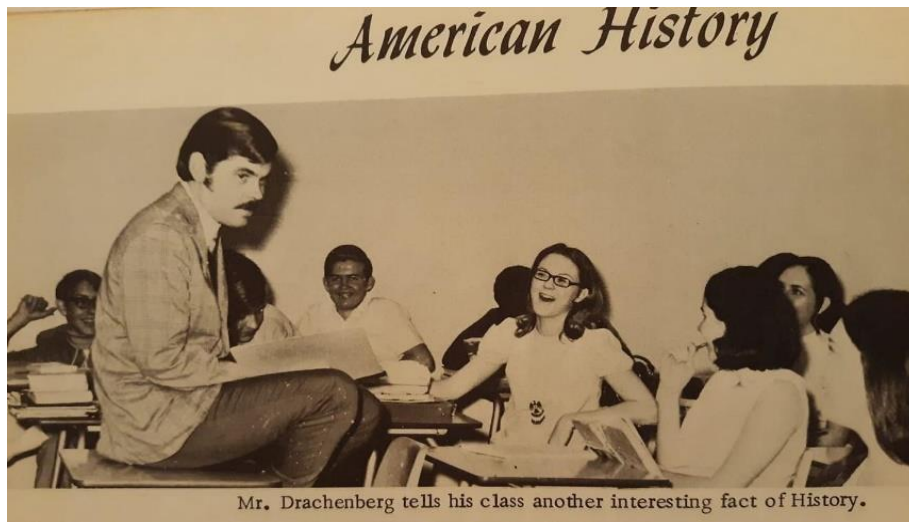


Photo from the 1968 Viking, Dulles High School's yearbook.

DRACHENBERG: Yeah, I think I did. I still bump into students every now and then that say, I never liked history until I went and got into this or that class. That makes you feel good. American history--It brings on just wonderful memories. What fun.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you know Maxine Phelan?

DRACHENBERG: Oh, very well, yeah.

BAUMGARTNER: Did you have a chance to read her oral history interview? It was her experience of teaching at Lamar ISD.

DRACHENBERG: She was a great teacher.

BAUMGARTNER: She was so enthusiastic and so committed to it. She made an impact on a lot of kids. Of course, she just recently had a school named after her.

DRACHENBERG: I know. Boy, for somebody to get a school named after you while you're still alive, to me that's like heavy duty. It just doesn't happen to us mere mortals, you know.

Maxine liked her job. You got to like what you do. You got to have a lot of enthusiasm, natural enthusiasm. I liked teaching every day. I loved going to school.

BAUMGARTNER: When you were teaching, as far as relationship with the principals or any of the rest of it, what were the good points and what were the hang ups?

DRACHENBERG: That's a good question. The good points are where you became friends with most everybody.

BAUMGARTNER: You mean the faculty.

DRACHENBERG: The faculty, the administrators, the counselors, the students.

It was a family, and you became friends with everybody. I even worked in the summers up there. I worked in maintenance for extra money because teachers were off during the summers back then.

In those days you got a check every month. You were paid for nine months, but it was divided into twelve equal payments, and I got my same paycheck during the summer that I got during the winter. But then I was making that extra money, so Doris and I used it to take a summer trip every year.

We started taking summer trips from the get-go, right after we got married. We'd go for three weeks every summer, get in the Volkswagen or the Ford and take off. We'd go East Coast one summer, next summer west, next summer south. We'd go for three weeks and take a road trip to upstate New York, or California.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow. That's a great experience.

DRACHENBERG: We still talk about that a lot. That we were so lucky that we did that.

We've got lots of memories and covered a lot of miles. We wish we would have slowed down a little bit. We could have said, while we're young, why don't we stay in this place two or three days instead of two or three hours?

BAUMGARTNER: You had your family with you too, right? You have two girls?

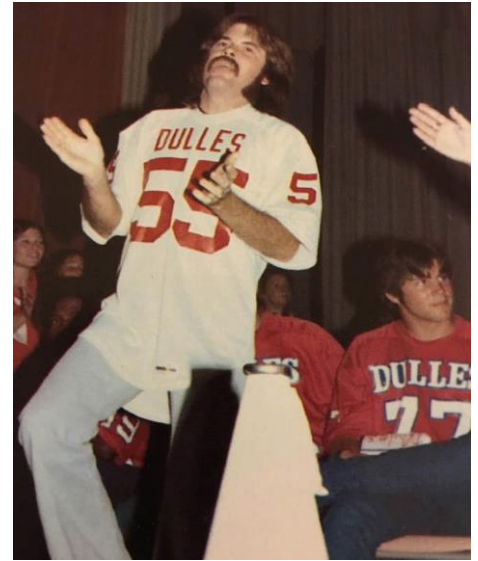
DRACHENBERG: Yeah, we've got two girls. They're both teachers. My youngest daughter Terry bought the house I was raised in, in Needville, when my mom died. That worked out great. She kept everything in the house. She teaches in Simonton. It's a church school, an elementary school in Simonton.

And my oldest daughter Laura is in Schulenburg, and she teaches at the Catholic school there.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, they're both teachers. Both small town teachers too. That's nice.

DRACHENBERG: Small town teachers. I tried to lure them into public school; public schools pay way more than the private schools, but they both like their job so much.

BAUMGARTNER: That's wonderful. My daughter's been in teaching almost twenty years.



Don livens up a Dulles pep rally in the mid-1970s. (Photo from Viking yearbook.)

DRACHENBERG: For me, the experience of teaching school in my teaching days was quite different from today. It was just a thoroughly enjoyable experience. To give you an idea how different things were back then, the faculty would play jokes on each other. It was stuff that you wouldn't even think about doing today.

Here's an example of a favorite experience I still remember.

One day, I'm showing my class this movie and the little intercom phone on the wall rings. The movie's still going on. I answer the phone. It's the principal, he says you've got a phone call, can you come down here and take it? And I said yeah. My kids continue watching the movie. No problem, I left the classroom and went to the front. The ladies in front hand me the phone and hello, hello...Nobody is there. They said, well, someone was there a minute ago, I guess he hung up. Okay. So I went back to the room, went in the back, sat down. The film is still going, I finish grading papers, and the film ends.



*Doris and Don with daughters
Laura and Terry.*

I hit the light switch and look at the class. I don't recognize a kid in my class! I have no idea who these kids are! This is my room. What the hell? They're all kind of laughing, and then you can hear laughing across the hall. While the movie was going, the principal called me, said I had a phone call. I didn't. The lady across the room, another history teacher, took her class, put her group into my room, took my class into her room [laughing].

It was all a trick. Great stunt! Could you do it today?"

BAUMGARTNER: That's great! I never heard of that one.

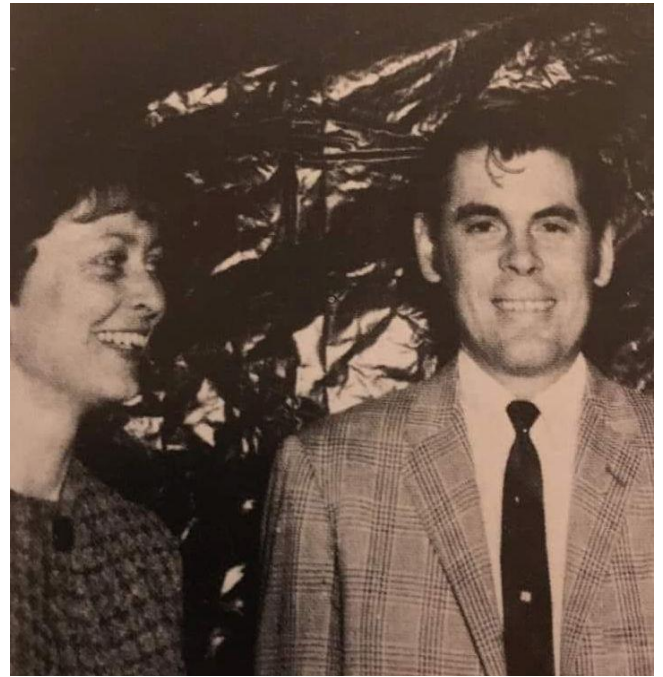
DRACHENBERG: You can't do jokes like that nowadays.

BAUMGARTNER: This was high school in the 1970s, right?

DRACHENBERG: High school in the '70s.

BAUMGARTNER: My daughter teaches and I know her experience is not becoming easier today.

DRACHENBERG: Yeah, over the years, it's getting more and more stressful on the teachers. Nowadays it's just my hats off to anybody who stays in teaching or goes into teaching because it's such an important job. And I don't know how this is going to all end up.



Don with Dulles High School colleague, Joan Batcha, who also taught American History in the early

BAUMGARTNER: That's the problem. Where does it go?

DRACHENBERG: So much work because you've always got work outside the teaching hours. You've got preparation, grading paper; I don't know how many hours a day I spent, but I needed to stay up at Dulles till about 6:00. School let out at 3:30, and I tried to get most of my work done from 3:30 to 6:00 and rarely bring my stuff home. It's a long day. I had to be there at like, 7:30 in the morning; I'd leave the house at 7 a.m. and get home at 6:30 in the evening.

BAUMGARTNER: How long did you stay at Dulles?

DRACHENBERG: Well, I taught there for fourteen years, and I had taught two years at Sam Houston at the beginning while working on my master's, so sixteen years teaching total. It was a wonderful experience. Over sixteen years, a lot of people get to know you and you get to know a lot of people. You don't become good friends with every one of them, but you do become good friends with many. And some are

still close friends that I have kept in touch with over the years.

But as the years went by the school experience began changing and the administrative end of teaching became a grind, and I started enjoying it less and less. After a while I was torn between really liking teaching and thinking about quitting.

For some time, my wife and my brother's wife had been thinking about opening up a retail camera store here in town, and in the late 70's they decided to go ahead. Initially a small office was opened at the old Kroger shopping center on Avenue H. Then the business started growing, a larger office was needed, and we relocated to a vacant drugstore building over on Avenue I.

They decided that they needed my help full-time, or it would be necessary to hire a full-time person. I was faced with the decision whether or not to remain in teaching, but that made my employment decision easier, and I said no, I'll come in there. I quit Dulles and came in working with Doris. The camera store was named Cameras Unlimited.

CAMERAS UNLIMITED

BAUMGARTNER: When did Cameras Unlimited open?

DRACHENBERG: It was initially opened in 1978. We closed it down in 2008. Cameras Unlimited lasted thirty years.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow, that's a great track record. A very small percentage of start-up businesses survive more than five years, not close to anything like thirty years.

DRACHENBERG: No regrets on that. We just made so many friends. I liked what I did. I mean, we helped a lot of other people. So many people that I know I met through the camera store. We had the photo lab back there in the back and that was fun. Tom and Donna McNutt. Donna K. Tucker. All the different people; maybe I would have met them anyway, but maybe not.

BAUMGARTNER: Yeah, well, you guys were a real benefit to people like me who

weren't handy with cameras and needed help with photography. You tell Doris that I miss you guys over there. What do people do now when we have a camera problem?

DRACHENBERG: They can't help you at CVS drugstore. It was really fun. We had a lot of fun working with our customers.

BAUMGARTNER: Did I ever see Doris up there? Where did she office?

DRACHENBERG: She was in the office in back. She hardly ever worked the counter. She was in charge of the finances and the payroll, and she was really the boss who could tell me what I could order and what I couldn't order. She ran a pretty tight ship, and we built it up from nothing.

We grew the business. We were leasing the building and the owner agreed to sell it to us if we could pay cash. Do you know Sue Mitchell?

BAUMGARTNER: Yes, for many years.

DRACHENBERG: Sue was our banker. I knew Sue from high school, actually; she was a friend of my cousin. She was working at Community Bank and helped arrange the financing and we bought the building in 1984.

It was a lot of fun and we continued to grow the business but I guess starting around 2000, business conditions started changing. You got the Internet and of course, Walmart came into Rosenberg and all of a sudden there was all kind of competition. The Dollar store, Dollar General. In a small town, they really impact a lot of the small businesses.

Things started dropping off, and it continued, and after a couple years we discussed shutting it down. In 2008 We decided to close. My last day of work over there was a Saturday. Me and Doris and Frank Gutowsky, our long-time photo lab manager.

BAUMGARTNER: Was it traumatic to close your business and retire?

DRACHENBERG: Yeah. It was a really hard decision, and Doris and I argued about it for many months. She said it was time to close it down, and I didn't want to. She was right! We had a good run. And we decided it was time to shut it down. It was

something that I had hoped to continue to keep doing a lot longer, and I enjoyed doing it. But we did retain ownership of the building.

RETIREMENT?

BAUMGARTNER: You were too young for retirement.

DRACHENBERG: Yep. Two days later, on Monday, I started to work for Billy Hafer over at Hafer Case. We knew each other, and we were friends. He heard that we were going to shut down. He called, "Hey, I need somebody up in the front office. I have a guy here at work with me who quit, why don't you come over and work?" "

I said no thank you. He asked some more, and I said, okay. And like a dummy, when we shut down that Saturday and locked the door, that Monday I started to work for Billy. I should have taken a month or two off. I don't know why I didn't.

BAUMGARTNER: I know Billy's company down there at the end of Avenue I has been there a long time.

DRACHENBERG: He's a hard-working dude, I'm telling you. Really a nice guy. It's hard to believe I've worked there since 2008. Fourteen years. It seems like I've only been there for three or four.

BAUMGARTNER: Don, your life has been good. Your college experience was good. Your teaching experience was good. You shifted right into Cameras Unlimited, which was good. And then you took one day off and went back to work.

DRACHENBERG: And I like it over there.

BAUMGARTNER: Consider the possible scenarios that might have taken place. When people have job changes, the options aren't always that attractive.

DRACHENBERG: I've thought about what you said earlier about being blessed. I grew up in Needville and loved it, loved Needville High School, college was a good experience, liked teaching, the band...I never thought about it till you just said it in those kinds of words.

BAUMGARTNER: If you wouldn't have had good places to move on to, your life could have been a lot different.

OK, what about The Triumphs? You said The Triumphs are winding down.

DRACHENBERG: Yeah, we're winding down. Last Saturday night, we did New Year's Eve, in Giddings, at a place called The Silos.

BAUMGARTNER: Oh, I didn't know you were still performing.

DRACHENBERG: I would rather have been home with Doris watching the old ball drop in New York at 11:00 p.m. for the midnight celebration. I 've done that dozen and dozens and dozens of times over my lifetime, with the Triumphs.

But it doesn't quite have the allure as it did in days past. Of course, I got to see a lot of people come out of the woods that I hadn't seen in a long time. I got to visit a bunch of old friends. That was the biggest plus of those NYE performances, getting to visit with old friends. Some even go back with me to my college days at Sam Houston. And, lots of members of my family and extended family always came out to see us on NYE, and that always made that performance super special.



Don and Ronnie Peterson performing at a Lamar Consolidated class reunion.

So, the band has been fun, but two more performances and it's all over. We're doing the old Swiss Alps Hall at Schulenberg, and Riverside Hall in East Bernard at the end of this month. That will be the big one.

BAUMGARTNER: I went to at least one at Riverside Hall back in the early 90's. It was a big one. You could see the cars from the highway. It was extremely crowded, and you had to get there in the afternoon, Saturday afternoon, to get a place to park for the evening. Everyone we used to party with was there, no seats available.

DRACHENBERG: Yeah, that was 1992. That was a monster. And then we did one there again the following summer with BJ Thomas. That was also huge. It was at Riverside, too.

But the last dates for The Triumphs in this part of the world are going to be at Riverside Hall in East Bernard on January 28, 2023, and the finale at the Old Swiss Alps Hall. And this is a for real... hanging it up.

THE TRIUMPHS FROM THE BEGINNING

BAUMGARTNER: We talked earlier just briefly about the original Triumph group getting started in 1959. All right, so let's talk about The Triumphs from the beginning. How it started, with whom, what, where, when, and why.

DRACHENBERG: Looking back, had it not been for Tim, there probably wouldn't have been a band, because in talking recently we got to telling stories about Tim.

The original core band members started messing with instruments in 1959. Tim Griffith, with the guitar his dad got him; Teddy Mensik, drums; Denny Zatyka, bass guitar. They wanted to start a band. They decided to draft me as a saxophone player, and then BJ Thomas.

What happened was Denny had a cousin who was in the Needville High School band with me, and Denny was telling her about them starting a band and needing a sax player, and she told him about me. Denny showed up at my house, during Christmas holidays in December of '59, and told me they needed me to play sax in their band. I wasn't interested even a little bit, and I said, no, I'm not even interested. He kept coming and coming to the house trying to get me to come to practice. He said, you just got to come one time, and then I won't bother you anymore. And they badgered me into finally saying, okay, okay, I'll come to a practice. Denny came by and picked me up. I didn't even have to drive there. And the day that I went to that practice, that was the first day too for BJ Thomas.

They were practicing in a beer joint called Club 90 because it was on 90A, past Larry's Mexican Restaurant on the other side of Richmond going toward Houston, just a beer joint with a bunch of guys drinking beer. That's where it all started. That first practice that I went to that day was in December of '59. I was 17.

And the guys seemed to be like real nice guys, and I started going to practices maybe about once a week. And the crazy places we practiced. I remember we practiced in the Lone Star Beer warehouse a whole lot. We seemed to have a free key for getting into the door. And they're drinking beer, which, you know, for a teenage kid, hey, this is pretty cool. I never was a beer drinker, but it still was pretty cool.

BAUMGARTNER: Where was the Lone Star Beer warehouse?

DRACHENBERG: It was on Rychlik Road here in Rosenberg off Louise Street, where Rychlik dead ended. We even practiced in the Holy Rosary School gym building right east of the Cameras Unlimited building on Avenue I that was part of the original Holy Rosary School. There was a gymnasium in there. I don't know how we got permission to practice there. Somebody had connections with the priest.



The Triumphs in 1960.

BAUMGARTNER: Someone was a good Catholic.

DRACHENBERG: I think everybody in the band was a Catholic but me. Anyway, we

practiced there a bunch of times. We practiced in different people's garages. All the garage bands did back then.

BAUMGARTNER: So, when did you start performing?

DRACHENBERG: First performance was at a place called the Teen Canteen in Richmond, which was at the Episcopal Church.

BAUMGARTNER: I think I might have gone to one of those some years later.

DRACHENBERG: You remember that way back? Yeah. And there was like a little teenage club or something there. It was kind of being run out of Lamar High School.

BAUMGARTNER: Didn't they go there after ball games and stuff?

DRACHENBERG: Yes, exactly. But this wasn't after a ball game because it was in January, they must have had dances periodically. Kids got together. But that was our first public appearance. It was free. As I recall, we knew about ten or twelve songs, totally. And we had to play each one of them twice just to kind of get through an evening.

But that was the first place we played. And then a couple two, three weeks after that, we played at the American Legion Hall on Highway 36 for the CYO (Catholic Youth Organization). We were really involved with the Catholics because I remember we got paid \$25. There was five of us, and each one of us gave our \$5 to Denny Zatyka's mother, Marie Zatyka, and she bought us black shirts and embroidered them with "Triumphs" and with our individual names.

And then things started kind of falling in place, primarily, I think, because of Mr. Zatyka, the Lone Star beer distributor, because he knew people in Eagle Lake and East Bernard and LaGrange.

BAUMGARTNER: You know what's interesting? That so many little bands all over Texas tried to get kicked off at the same time, with three or four or five kids trying to create a band, but they all die a natural death. What's interesting is that you guys with the same crappy little start were successful and endured for years.

DRACHENBERG: Yeah, but you're right. Most garage bands fall by the wayside after a year or two. And we weren't that good at the beginning. We couldn't have been.

We just had a lot of friends and fans and there was something, I don't know, something kind of special, I guess, maybe about the persona, the personality of the band. And no doubt BJ had a lot to do with that, too. He had a distinctive voice, even as a kid.

BJ was the lead vocalist from day one. When we started until he left in March of '66 with the band. Actually, seven years, because it started in January of '60, and he left in March of '66. He had offers to go on this tour, and the song "I Am So Lonesome I Could Cry" was on the top charts in the nation, number one in Houston, and it was a real big thing.

But there were three or four of us in college at that time. And we just said, we can't do this. We weren't ready to scuttle our whole semester of college. And none of us, really, had the same drive he had.

I mean, BJ wanted to be a musician and he wanted to be a singer and a successful one. And he did good. He had the right drive, and he did the right thing. And I think the rest of us did good too, by not doing it, we did the right thing for us.

He went and toured around the country, hopped here and there, hopped in different bands. It's a pretty funky life. You're living in motels, you're not making that much money, you're spending nearly all of it. A lot of people look back and you think, what do you have to show for all that?

We were content with staying, being a local band. We already had established places we were playing at. People liked us and we just kept doing the same thing that we had always done in pretty much the same places.

BJ THOMAS CAREER

BAUMGARTNER: Was BJ gaining popularity at that time?

DRACHENBERG: Well, the song did well, he was popular with us. People knew him in our area, and they knew who he was outside of the Texas Gulf Coast. But nobody

could have possibly known who he was then without "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" doing so good.

BAUMGARTNER: What was his relationship with the record? Is that his song?

DRACHENBERG: No, it was Hank Williams' song. We were recording an album in Pasadena at the tail end of 1965, we played Friday night and then recorded all day Saturday, then left for a performance Saturday night, and then returned back to the studio late Saturday night. I remember we were just finishing up; it was around 6:00 AM, everybody was dog tired and one of the record producers said that we needed one more song to complete the time slots on the album.

A guy at the studio said, why don't you do that old Hank Williams song, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." We said, okay, and we did it, and we finished that recording session, and headed for home. I don't even know how it got into airplay, but anyway, then it started getting some airplay and next thing you know, it took off and made number one in the charts in Houston and nationally maybe about number three or number four.



Bj Thomas

BAUMGARTNER: How did you get permission or authorization to record it?

DRACHENBERG: Evidently the guys that we were kind of hooked up with who were running the recording studio, they had to sign or get some kind of paperwork. I guess Hank Williams, or his son get the royalties out of that. I mean, you can't just record somebody's song without permission.

BAUMGARTNER: Somebody owned some rights to it.

DRACHENBERG: Yes, somebody had to. How much do you make off it? Make? We never even thought about making any money off that record till several years later. We never made any money off any of the records we made. I mean, we were just a bunch of dumb kids that kind of did what did what we were told. We never really thought about it. You know, we had several records that did well in Houston, the first being "Lazy Man," then "I've Got A Feeling," a couple of others, and "Garner State Park."

Editor's Note: Click the YouTube links below to hear original recordings of selected songs Don mentions in his oral history:

- ["I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry"](#)
- ["Lazy Man"](#)
- ["I've Got A Feeling"](#)
- ["Garner State Park"](#)

BJ's career really took off, though, after he did the theme song from Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. "Raindrops." He got that Raindrops song which he acknowledged he got just by chance, by being in the right place at the right time. The studio was rushing through to get that song recorded because the movie was due to be released, like, in a week or two or something. Two other singers in front of BJ weren't available and they grabbed BJ and he recorded it at the studio even though he actually had a sore throat at the time.

BAUMGARTNER: How did he come out of it financially?

DRACHENBERG: He had to come out of it, I would think, pretty strong for a song that big. That song won the Grammy. It was a huge, huge song.

BAUMGARTNER: "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head," everyone knows it.

DRACHENBERG: I don't care whether you're a country person or whatever, that was a huge, huge song. But then he had some other songs that were hits, too. He ended up winning five Grammys. And course, he recorded, too, a gospel album, a couple of country albums. He was pretty prolific in music styles. He got into the gospel thing and that kind of phased out, and the country thing faded out some, but those people

stayed with him.

BAUMGARTNER: When he had left Rosenberg, did he live in Houston, or did he travel all the time?

DRACHENBERG: He kind of bounced around, I'm not exactly sure where. Then he married Gloria in the late sixties, a Houston girl. He and Gloria lived in Arlington, Texas, for decades, you know, for a long, long time. Doris and I went and visited him and Gloria in Arlington a couple of times.

BAUMGARTNER: They stayed married.

DRACHENBERG: Yes, he stayed married the whole time, which is really extraordinary.

BAUMGARTNER: Really, for the type of career lifestyle he had.

DRACHENBERG: It says a whole lot about each one of them because, yeah, they were married that whole time. Doris and I got married in '64, and he and Gloria got married a few years after us.

BAUMGARTNER: So, you and Doris were married when BJ was in the band.

DRACHENBERG: Yeah, in fact, we had started dating in the fall of 1961. So, BJ knew Doris real well because we were together a lot. Doris grew up with the band. BJ always had a real affinity for us because looking back at it, the other marriages didn't last as well for the other early guys. Oddly enough, looking back to the original band, I think BJ and I were the only two that stayed married to the same girls. I never gave that any thought until just now.

BAUMGARTNER: Yeah. The lifestyle is just not conducive to marriage stability, and especially when you're young.

DRACHENBERG: Yes. And out of the band, BJ and I were always close, really good friends. And even though there were some years in between, we were close, and had a special relationship, particularly towards the last when we got back together these

dozen years or so. And he ALWAYS asked about Doris. There was a special bond between Doris and B.J. as well,

BAUMGARTNER: What was BJ like?

DRACHENBERG: Likeable, very strong willed, kind of had a temper when he was a kid. He could set off his temper kind of easy, but he was nothing like that when got older. But he was young then. He was a little cocky. So was Roy Head. So was Dean Scott. People who have a hit record all have kind of a swagger to them, at least initially, in their early years.

But we sort of lost contact in the late sixties and seventies, and then we started contacting each other, like on your birthday or something. We would hear from each other every once in a while. But by the time we were really having telephone conversations again rather than just little pleasantries, he was just a very down to earth, likable, nice guy. He was just a really nice, nice guy.

BAUMGARTNER: He grew up in Rosenberg.

DRACHENBERG: Yeah, he went to Lamar High School. He went to middle school for a couple of years in Houston, and then moved to Rosenberg and went to Lamar High School, so did his sister and his brother.

BAUMGARTNER: That's where you guys met him.

DRACHENBERG: It's kind of interesting, too. The Lamar guys had me come to practice because I played sax in the Needville band. And then BJ was in the Lamar High School choir. So, they sort of picked him out and said, how would you like to be in the band? Tim and Teddy and Denny recruited him. BJ and I were both seniors then.

BAUMGARTNER: And you were in Needville High School.

DRACHENBERG: Yeah, I was the only immigrant.

BAND MEMBERS FAMILIES

BAUMGARTNER: Could you offer a quick snapshot of what the band was like originally, and the individual members? What were their families like?

DRACHENBERG: Well, Denny Zatyka played rhythm guitar, Tim Griffith played lead guitar, I played sax and sang harmony on some songs with B.J., Tom Griffith bass guitar, and Teddy Mensik drums, and B.J. did all the lead vocals.

But it was kind of weird. When we got started, they didn't know how to play their instruments. They decided what they wanted to play and then bought the instruments. Tim's dad gives him a guitar and he starts messing with it and learns to play guitar. Then Denny buys a guitar and learns how to play rhythm guitar. Then Teddy decides to be the drummer, and buys a set of drums. And so on.

BAUMGARTNER: What kind of families did they grow up in? What were their moms and dads like?

DRACHENBERG: They were all small-town, nice, down-to-earth people like my parents. No fancy stuff. Drove a ford or a chevy, etc.

Like Gary Koeppen, our trumpet guy—he was a local boy, down to earth, and his parents were like mine. Now Denny Zatyka's parents were a little different, than the rest of ours; they were in business, they had a beer distributorship, and they did have more money, nicer cars. But they were nice people, we liked them, their circumstances were just not quite the same.

But in general, the parents were same as my family. Just small-town people, plain-Jane friendly, likable like you would think. Typical Rosenberg.

BAUMGARTNER: Is Teddy Mensik related to the old Mensik grocery store people? I used to see him at the Bohemian Hill and the Mustang way back when.

DRACHENBERG: Teddy Mensik used to be a regular at the Hill, I don't know now. He is kin to all the Mensiks. They're either cousins or aunts, whatever. Tim Griffith passed away recently, just last month. Cancer. He'd worked at Kelly Kaluza

surveyors for years, and him and Linda lived out in Fairchilds for years and years and years.

Gary Koeppen is retired, living in Matagorda, he's lived in Matagorda for a whole bunch of years and done real well.

BAUMGARTNER: It sounds like for almost all your old band guys, their lives weren't permanently altered by the band experience. It was more like a part-time phase of their life that gave them a different slant, maybe, but nothing dominant.

DRACHENBERG: That's right. With our players, we lost some over the years and we added some. We added Ronnie Peterson from Boling, sax player in 1967.

BAUMGARTNER: When did BJ move on?

DRACHENBERG: 1966.

BAUMGARTNER: So, then he hit the big time, I guess.

DRACHENBERG: And actually, we didn't hear much from him for a good while after that. We just kind of lost contact with him. It's like people you're going to keep track of, like high school buddies or college buddies, and you don't.

BAUMGARTNER: So how long was he out of the loop?

DRACHENBERG: We kind of stayed in touch, but after a few years, we basically didn't hear anything from him anymore for a good while. It was probably twenty years before we were sort of reconnecting regularly, calling each other regularly. He performed with us at East Bernard in 1993, and I guess it was around 2010 that we really started talking a lot. He said, you know, we need to get together, do some things together. Part of it was nostalgia. We're getting older; that happens to all of us. And then we started little by little performing with him again.

And he absolutely loved it. When he came and did things with us, we had an eight-piece band and a full horn section, which was not typical for B.J. (his touring band had no horns), and he loved it. It was fun. It was different. It was nostalgic. And we did some of the same songs we had done with him that we did in the early '60s. We

did "Midnight Hour", "My Girl", "Stand by Me," "What I Say," Bobby Blue Bland songs, and so on.

BAUMGARTNER: And it was fun.

DRACHENBERG: It was fun. And he just joined in. He would say, Man, we got to do more of this.

BAUMGARTNER: How did BJ pass away?

DRACHENBERG: Cancer. He died in May of 2021. We were talking pretty regularly (phone) during that time. The pandemic started in February '20, and all of our bookings just disappeared after February 2020. Public gatherings were cancelled. And all of B.J.s stuff pretty much either went down the tubes or cancelled or postponed indefinitely. He started complaining, my throat isn't in good shape, I'm not feeling good. That was in the fall of 2020. Then he called me in early 2021 and just out of the blue he said, hey, I got some bad news for you. I have stage four lung cancer.



Don and BJ.

He fought it, but after that it just never got good. He was close to 80 when he passed.

IMPACT OF THE BAND

BAUMGARTNER: How would you say that the relationship with BJ, and the Triumphs, affected your life? The band itself and the entire experience.

DRACHENBERG: Well, the band affected my entire life. If Tim had not gotten a guitar from his dad, man, there wouldn't have been a band. If there wouldn't have

been a band, I would have never met my wife that night we were playing at Hallettsville.

With the band, we became real good friends. All the band guys were friends. The band wives were all friends with each other.

I made friends teaching, and Doris and I made friends through the camera store, and we made friends through the band and at band performances – folks came out from Lake Jackson and Bay City and Wharton and East Bernard and Hallettsville and LaGrange and Cuero, and they kept coming back, time and time again, I've got friends in all those towns.

BAUMGARTNER: An interesting thing to me is that vocationally, for the rest of your life, your circumstances remained so ordinary. You taught school and you had a camera business and so on, but the band was such an exceptional experience you'd think it somehow might have permeated your whole life, and you wouldn't have lived such a normal, typical life. But it all worked out.

DRACHENBERG: Everything we did, in the band, we did together. It's like everybody came to everybody's birthday parties, everybody came to everybody's anniversary parties. If you got together for a July 4th picnic, it was all of us, it was a family. I got to be a lot closer to them than I did to my own brother and sister.

BAUMGARTNER: The Triumphs are closing down now. Would you say you guys are definitely shutting down for good at this point?

DRACHENBERG: Oh, definitely. For 60 years I've had to spend New Year's Eve with the band. I ain't gonna do that next year. We've laughed about it over the years, but I mean, every New Year's Eve you're going to be on a stage and playing in the band. Our friends have always said, but we want you to play. Well, I know, but we don't want to do it anymore. And I'm kind of looking forward to sitting at home and watching the ball drop on TV with Doris.

BAUMGARTNER: Of the original core, which guys are still around?

DRACHENBERG: Well, me, Gary Koeppen, Teddy Mensik, Tom Griffin.

BAUMGARTNER: Wow, Don, you look back on it, really, it's lasted so long. Sixty years later, there's still half the band. That's a remarkable history. Congratulations.

DRACHENBERG: Thanks. It's been a lot of fun talking to you.

-End of interview-