

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Frank John Ferro**

Interview Date: 07/06/2016

Interviewer: Roberta Terrell

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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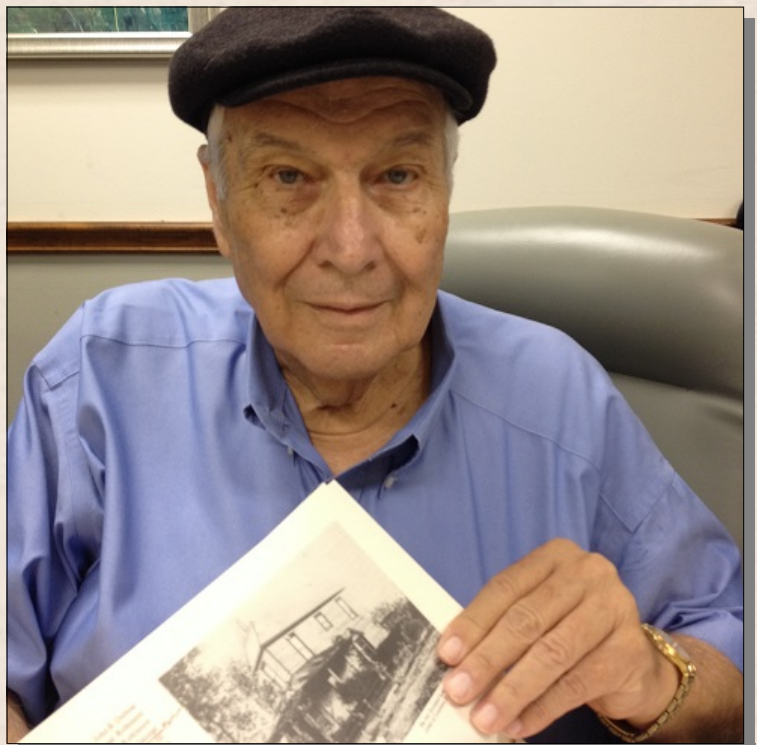
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*Transcript*

TERRELL: Please tell me your name and date of birth.

FERRO: John Ferro, November 11, 1938. I was born in Eldridge Memorial Hospital, in Sugar Land, Texas. My mom and dad had come from Italy, and I'm the 2nd generation of immigrants from my family. We were farmers. My dad's first wife passed away, leaving a big family of 13 kids. I went to school at the Missouri City School from first through twelfth grades.

TERRELL: What did your dad raise on the farm?

FERRO: Cotton and corn.

TERRELL: Do you remember your first day of school?

FERRO: A little bit. I was there, and I was nervous. Mom took me in, and I cried for a long time. I sat down and eventually I figured out that I was going to be there for a while. (laughs) There were three boys with the first name of Frank in the class. I had a middle name, and they didn't, so when Mrs. Robinson, the teacher, asked my mother and dad if she could call me John, they agreed. That's how I came to be called John Ferro. 100% of the people in Stafford do not know me as Frank. Only on legal papers and my driver's license do I use Frank.

TERRELL: Do you remember how the school was laid out when you walked in the front door?

FERRO: Yes. There was a little step, and the first-grade was on the left-hand side. It looked big to me because I was a little thing!

TERRELL: Do you remember what time school started each day?

FERRO: 8:30 in the morning, and the school year started in September, after Labor Day.

TERRELL: In the summer, did you work on the farm?

FERRO: Yes. I did odd jobs when the farm was bad. A lot of things flooded and that rain hurt the farm.

TERRELL: In the winter, did you play sports?

FERRO: Yes. I played football.

TERRELL: Do you remember the coach's name?

FERRO: Yes. There was Coach Bill Shaver, Coach Jim Ellis and Coach Wade.

TERRELL: Did you eat lunch in the cafeteria?

FERRO: Yes. Sometimes I bought my lunch and sometimes I took my lunch.

TERRELL: Do you remember your best friends names?

FERRO: Yes. Leonard Scarcella, Frankie Cash, and Clarence Duran. We kept up with each other. The majority of us went to first through twelfth grade together. We see each other quite frequently, about once a week. We have reunions every Christmas time, and every five years we all get together.

TERRELL: Do you remember any of the teachers and principals?

FERRO: The principal was E. A. Jones. The superintendent was L. P. Rodgers. The teachers were Mrs. Robinson for 1st grade; Mrs. King, the high school history teacher; Mr. Bond was the math teacher; Mr. Gibbons was the science teacher; Mrs. Eamon was the home-making teacher; Mr. Abercrombie was the FFA teacher; Mr. Wright was the shop teacher.

TERRELL: I think you liked school! (laughter) Did you take shop or were you in Future Farmers of America (FFA)?

FERRO: I was vice-president of the FFA chapter. I took shop and built a cedar chest.

TERRELL: Did you participate in the county fair?



*Leonard Scarcella, John's classmate at Missouri City High School and mayor of Stafford, Texas.*



*Frank Cash, John's classmate at Missouri City High School.*

FERRO: Yes, I did. I won Grand Champion Capon and Grand Champion Pen of Capons. The pen of capons is comprised of five chickens.

TERRELL: How many were in your graduating class?

FERRO: Twenty-five.

TERRELL: Did you have dances?

FERRO: Yes. After football games, they had them in the cafeteria. We had the Christmas dance and the prom in the gym. If you were a junior, you put on the Christmas dance for the seniors. Everybody could go for \$1 except for the seniors – they got in free.

The principal let the juniors have a day off a month to get together and prepare how we were going to decorate the gym. We took a pine tree that went from the floor to the top of the gym. We cut it at a cemetery and it fell on the truck by accident. We used scaffolding to decorate it with all blue lights. We turned the lights off in the gym and danced around the tree. It was really pretty.

TERRELL: Where did you have your graduation ceremony?

FERRO: In the gymnasium.

TERRELL: Were you involved in band or parades?

FERRO: No.

TERRELL: What do you remember about the Missouri City High School gym?

FERRO: It was built in the 1930s and as you came up to the gym, to the front door, on the right there was a small cafeteria. That was there a long time, until they built another cafeteria. This was a farming community, so bond elections had to be held to build a gym or a school building. The gym is intact today as it was before except for the windows. The old windows were pushed open with your hand. The laws have changed so they are Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant now. There was no air conditioning. The Spanish people could attend, but there was nothing for the African Americans. It was named the Missouri City Mustang High School Gym. A lot of basketball was played there. Missouri City was the king of having good basketball teams every year. We went to State, we won District, we won Regional – we won everything. They used to have district championship games that if we didn't win, our district did.

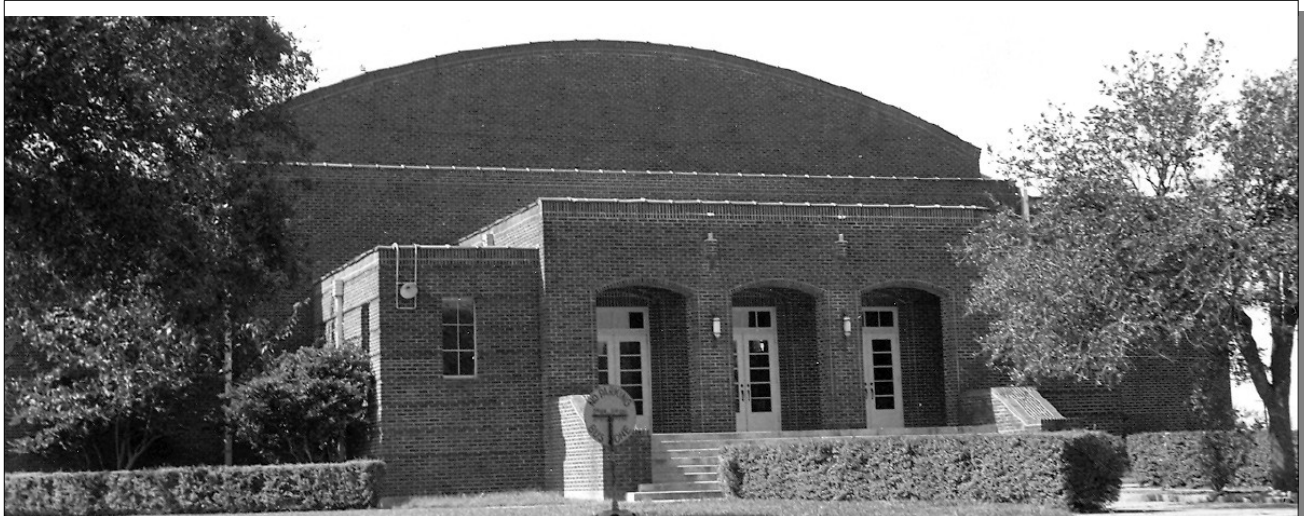


TERRELL: Did you play basketball?

FERRO: No, I didn't. I loved the game, but wasn't coordinated enough to play.

Weddings, dances, and meetings were all held in the gym. When a hurricane was in the Gulf, they opened the gym and the school for people to sleep there the night before the storm made landfall. You brought your own blankets and things.

The gym is intact today. You walk in and you have the floor, the bleachers on one side, dressing rooms on either side for boys and girls and a stage.



*Former Missouri City Middle School gymnasium will be restored to its original art deco design with help from Fort Bend County. --communityimpact.com, Nov. 30, 2016*

TERRELL: Tell me about the fight to save it when they wanted to tear it down. Why did they want to tear it down?

FERRO: Some members of the city said it was an eyesore. Graduates of the high school and Mr. Allen Robinson, who passed away about three years ago, went to work to try to save the gym. We went to the City of Missouri City, and they wouldn't even talk to us. The City Manager was against it. He said it was an eyesore and needed a wrecking ball. We went to see our friend, Lee Petros, who was Assistant Superintendent at Fort Bend Independent School District (FBISD). He told us what we could do and what we couldn't do, and that it was up to the City of Missouri City. I said, "Lee, we need to do this. It's not fair. The two school districts consolidated to form FBISD. You've saved one district's gym and school buildings and you tore ours down. I think we should have the same thing."

His eyes rolled back in his head and he said, "You know, you're right." Even if there were differences between the groups, we should do it. He told me he would see what he could do for me, but he couldn't guarantee anything.

Then Allen Robinson and I went to see FBISD school board. We asked if we could do this. I brought up the issue of it not being fair to tear one school down and leave the other one. The superintendent was a lady who said, "Mr. Ferro, we'll look into it, and if we can, we're going to do everything to help you." So that was a break.

We went back to the City of Missouri City, to a city council meeting, and we got some support from city council. Finally, we got a resolution from the city saying they would not tear the gym down. They did say that under the zoning regulations we had to bring it up to code before it could be used. We understood that. It had old wiring and wasn't ADA compliant.

There was no money available for that, but FBISD had a bond election coming up and Lee told me they had \$2,000,000 in the budget for something like this. He asked me to get the people who lived in the district to vote for the bond election. It had failed once before. So, I told him I would do that. I wrote letters to all of the alumni and so did Allen Robinson. They voted for it, and it passed. The \$2,000,000 sat there. They changed superintendents and he didn't know what was going on. He didn't stay long and they got somebody else. The new superintendent had no problem with preserving the gym. We don't have any use for it right now. That's when they had a big program to build the new E. A. Jones Elementary School.

So, we went back to Lee Petros and asked him to save the gym. He said, "John, we're going to do that." We went back to Missouri City and they said, "You've got to use that gym and bring it up to code." I said, "That's not the problem." They drew up a resolution to save the gym. So, it's been saved but funds are not available. I understand there is a possibility there are funds available today.

TERRELL: What do you foresee it being used for?

FERRO: We're trying to restore it to be the same as it was before. The outside of the building should be red brick but it's been painted a different color. We need to restore the windows. You could use it for kids to play or any events because it would be brought up to code.

TERRELL: When you say restore the windows, do you mean push-out windows?

FERRO: Yes. Now they are all sealed up and there are no windows at all. They have it air conditioned now. There wasn't air conditioning in the past, not even a fan blowing. Coaches thought if you put a fan in there, it affected the basketball. (laughter) After we got the okay, Allen Robinson got sick, and he passed away. I've kept on pushing, and then Grady Prestage got involved.

TERRELL: I think that's commendable.

FERRO: I was excited about it, that we did save the gym. But the lack of funds has kept us from doing the renovation work that is needed. The superintendent said he would do what he could to try to fix it up.

TERRELL: How many people were helping you do this?

FERRO: Just me and Allen Robinson. I had support from the old timers, the alumni. I hope we can preserve it as it was. I've seen the pictures. Rice played SMU and Texas Tech played Baylor in that gym. The person who had the pictures, died. He had a son who we cannot locate. But I am trying. I've gone to Rice University and they believe that I'm correct with these facts. It would be a historical thing. The building is about 100 years old – it was built in the 1930s. It's probably one of the longest serving gymnasiums in the Gulf Coast, and one of the largest. A lot of gyms that are built today, the seating is right there at the bottom.

There were a lot of social events held in the gym such as weddings, musicals, and bands, for people in Stafford and Missouri City to go to.

TERRELL: When did you graduate from high school?

FERRO: 1958.

TERRELL: Do you have memories of when Missouri City ISD consolidated with Sugar Land ISD?

FERRO: A few. I was against it. I voted against it.

TERRELL: Why?

FERRO: It was a good thing for the students and their education but I hated for our school to have a different name. The memories would be gone. I followed the Fort Bend schools; the athletics were good. Some of our teachers were hired by FBISD and some left.

The first school was named John Foster Dulles School. I don't remember the date but I remember the vote. I was working for the school during the summer. Mr. L. P. Rodgers thought it was a good thing for the students because they would have more programs and they would get a better education. Sugar Land had problems. The majority of their district was surrounded by the prison system. They couldn't tax so they didn't have taxes. The only things they could tax was Sugarland Industries and the sugar mill and Visco Chemical.

TERRELL: So they didn't have a tax base?

FERRO: That's right. We had the tax base, had some oil wells, Blue Ridge. So that's what happened. Then everything started growing. Now there are so many school districts.

TERRELL: Are you retired?

FERRO: Semi-retired. I sell commercial real estate and work out of my house. If I don't feel like working, I watch the History Channel. I love history.

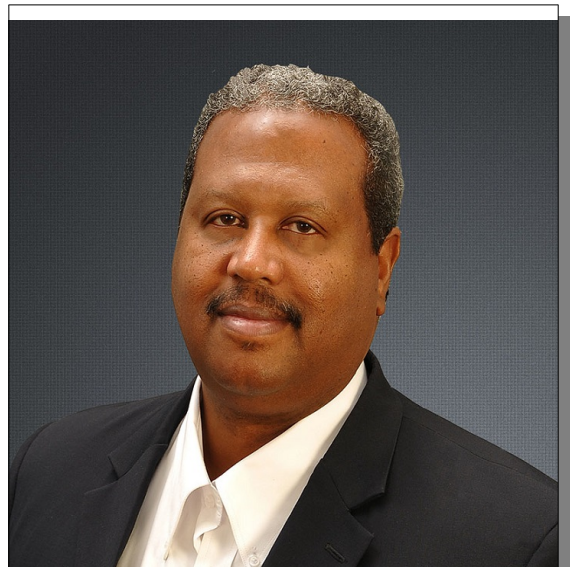
TERRELL: What did you do before you semi-retired?

FERRO: I used to work for the sugar company. I worked for them for 20 years. I got out of that and wanted to go into commercial real estate, which I love. I sold commercial real estate around Stafford and Missouri City. I'm still fighting for the gym.

TERRELL: Well, it sounds like you can't let up!

FERRO: No, I can't. I'm so happy that Grady Prestage got in the middle of it. He called me the first day and told me what he was going to do. I have a lot of respect for him.

TERRELL: Can you think of anything humorous or any really good memories from going to school there, that you would like to share?



*Fort Bend County Commissioner  
Precinct 2 Grady Prestage supported  
saving the original Missouri City  
High School gymnasium.*



FERRO: In the wintertime, we had Physical Education and a lot of us boys ran around the gym and the coaches watched us. We played basketball. There was a lot of paddling going on when we did things wrong. We were kids – we were boys. Teachers told us not to get on the bleachers and we'd do it anyway. So we'd get a couple of licks with a board. In those days you could paddle a student.

TERRELL: Do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing?

FERRO: It was a good thing. We learned respect. We had a lot of plays there. The school had a one-act play. We had politicians come there. We tried to imitate them.

TERRELL: It sounds like great memories.

FERRO: It is. I can see things today in my mind's eye. I hope they fix the gym like we want it to be. I'm going to fight hard for it.

TERRELL: I appreciate your coming and I will keep up with the news and make sure this is happening.

FERRO: Thank you.

Interview ends