

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Gillian Lewis Cooke**

Interview Date: 01/30/2010

Interviewer: Bruce Kelly

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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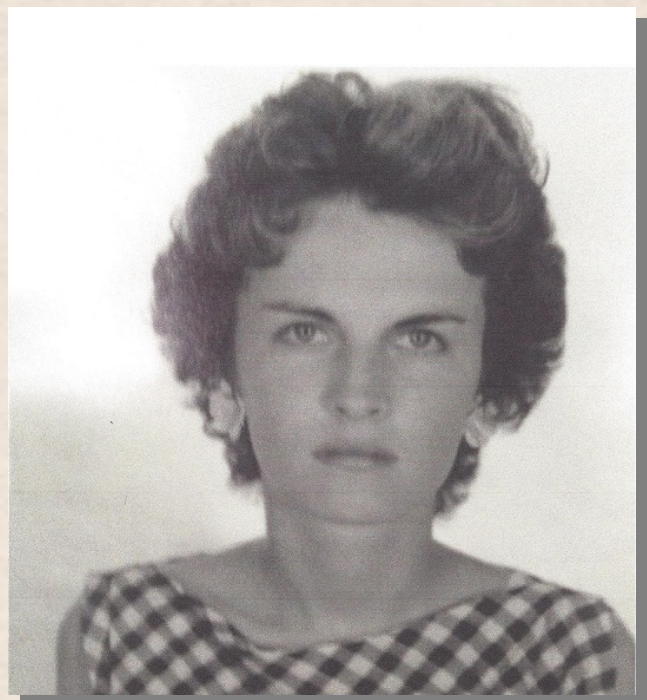
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*Transcript*

KELLY: Let's start with just a little biographical information. When and where were you born?

COOKE: I was born in the suburbs Birmingham, England, or what we call BIRM-ing-ham (pronounced as the English do, with the emphasis on the first syllable and little stress on the other two) Over here it's Birming-HAM. I lived there until I met my husband, Thomas Cooke. We married in England in 1954. He is the son of the Baptist preacher at the First Baptist Church in Sugar Land. His father was the preacher there for seventeen years. In 1956 we came over to Sugar Land, Texas, with our 10-month-old daughter, Roberta, and met his parents in 1956. I was also 7 months pregnant with Rebecca.

KELLY: Tell us about your parents.

COOKE: My father was one of the leading communications engineers in Birmingham. My childhood occurred before, during and after World War II. Because of his profession my father stayed in England working with radar and communications all over the U. K. He was not called up into the Armed Forces.

When I met my husband, he was in the U. S. Air Force. I met him in Birmingham. He had come into town with a group of G. I.s. There were NO air bases around where I lived. I was waiting outside the only dance hall in town for my date on Christmas Eve. My husband was standing in a Texas nylon suit, freezing to death (chuckling). He was going to attend the dance then go back to base on Christmas Eve night, and I said, "You cannot be on a base on Christmas Eve." So I took him home and introduced him to my father. Tommy was in communications in the Air Force. My father at the time was building a stereo, that was before stereos were invented. The two of them built and talked as they built this radio, putting speakers all over the house. I didn't see much of Tommy that whole Christmas! (laughing)



*Thomas Cooke, US Air Force*

Before he left, he turned around to my mother and he said, "I'm going to marry her." And my mother turned around and said, "Over my dead body!" (laughs) And Tommy replied, "If I have to." My father, as he left, showed him where the house key was in the garage. Whenever he got leave, I'd come home and he would be in the chair with the cat, asleep. So, that's how I met my husband in 1952! We got engaged in 1953 and we got married in 1954 in a little 14th century church after he was interviewed by my Vicar and the bans were read.

KELLY: Do you have memories of the bombings and the Blitz?

COOKE: Very much so! I'm actually writing a book about it. It's a fascinating story. We lived in the suburbs of Birmingham, and had a HUGE park at the back of our home, they actually put four anti-aircraft guns back there, and an Army camp! So, as you can imagine, we were bombed very, very regularly.

I was age 4 when war was declared, age 5 when the Blitz began; we were bombed for 76 consecutive days. The book I'm writing tells you that story of war from a child's perspective. Twenty thousand homes were destroyed and 1,852 tons of bombs were dropped during the blitz on Birmingham alone!

Plus there were factories that made engines for aeroplanes. Singer sewing machines, Jaguar and Rolls Royce made bombs and aircraft — the Spitfires, the engines, and all that, were right around where we lived. It's interesting to me, how children functioned during the war, how they accepted and survived chaos and death. After London we were the most targeted site for bombing by the Germans.

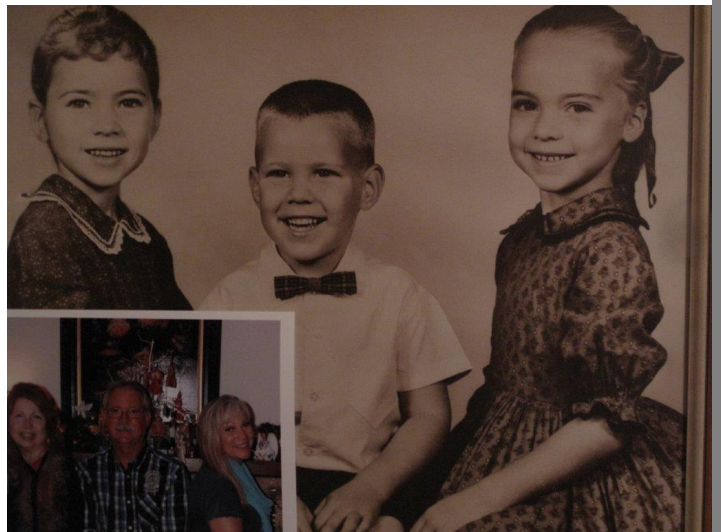
I had a sister, who's two years older than I, and whereas I've done a lot of work bringing back my memories and dealing with them, my sister hasn't. She very rarely talks about it. So, there's a big difference in our dealing with life. It took me years to confirm the memories and nightmares I had. She would get so angry when I mentioned it.

KELLY: Well, we'll look forward to reading your book!

COOKE: Yeah! (laughing) One of these days! When Coventry was destroyed in 1942, my mother decided to evacuate us. That was hell! I am still getting memories from that nightmare. I present "Children of War" to churches and schools. We see war on TV and our children need to know that children survived and also how many perished.

KELLY: Will you describe the first day that you came to Sugar Land, and what you saw, what your feelings were?

COOKE: Oooh! It was quite fascinating. We came on one of the old MATS aeroplanes with propellers. I had three children, Roberta, Rebecca and Russell. They ALL went to Dulles High School. Roberta was born in England. She was ten months old when I came here and I was pregnant with Rebecca at the time.



*Roberta, Russell, and Rebecca Cooke as children and adults (insert)*

So we came in this old aeroplane, and one engine went out flying over Labrador. Labrador was one frozen ice cap! And freezing cold. We came down in Labrador for the night then boarded another MATS (Military Air Transport Service) aeroplane. We landed in New York 36 hours later. It was around the beginning of June and in England, June is very cool, fifty degrees. We hit New York and I thought somebody had turned the heat on.

They opened the plane door and I couldn't breathe. I'm in wool! And I have Roberta dressed in wool. Here I was 7 months pregnant with a 10-month-old daughter dressed in wool clothes and it was 90 degrees. I had never been in 90 degrees in my life! I said, "There's something wrong. What's going on around here?!" Tommy said, "This is New York." Our whole idea was to buy a car and get out of there. For some reason my husband always wanted a Cadillac and he bought a Cadillac, which had been a demo model, and it didn't have an air conditioner! I didn't even know what an air conditioner was.

So we are driving and it's getting hotter and hotter, and I'm waiting for the cool. I said, "Well, surely where we're going it's going to be cooler!" After driving three days we arrived in Texas. We got to Sugar Land and it's getting hotter and hotter, and the HUMIDITY, I couldn't breathe. We went to the old parsonage on Wood Street. The pastor's wife was known as Momma Cooke. I didn't know her actual name for years. It was always Momma Cooke!



So we go in, and I was introduced to Momma Cooke and Daddy Cooke. That's quite different to how we talk to people over in England. I get in there and I can't breathe its so hot inside. There's one small air conditioner in the living room. And the rest was the old attic fans. I think I just passed out. They took Roberta, who cried constantly, for twenty-four hours. I'm laying on the couch and Momma comes in and said, "Well, we brought the doctor". I was pregnant at the time and they were worried about the baby. So, in comes the doctor. I'm laying there, soaked in sweat, and here's Doctor Slaughter! It was quite an experience.



*Emma Magdelene Cooke, known to all as "Momma" Cooke*

KELLY: Describe Dr. Slaughter to us.

COOKE: Well, I remember he was sort of stocky. I couldn't understand his accent! He couldn't understand MY accent. All I could say was that it was TOO hot. He sort of checked me over and he said he thought I was going to be all right. (laughing) Just to drink a lot of water. In England, we don't drink that much water. And I think I was probably dehydrated. But we got through that okay. My husband had orders for Abilene, Texas, so I'm thinking, "Well, Abilene is further north. It's going to be cooler and I can handle this." When we arrived in Abilene Air Force Base (AFB) it was 104 degrees and they had a plague of black crickets at the time. Then came a plague of mice. I told Tommy I thought God was angry at them.

The people in Sugar Land were VERY, VERY kind, very pleasant, very accepting. English people are sort of reserved. American people, especially Texans, are just very accepting. And, it was HARD for me to get used to a parsonage, because in England, you don't really run from neighbor to neighbor. In England, you only go if you're invited to somebody's home. And then you always knock on the door. Make sure that it's okay to even touch the doorknob. And of course, a parsonage has an open door. So I never knew when somebody was going to walk in. (laughing) I pretty well stayed with the door closed all the time! And everybody is SO comfortable with it. You just walk in, "Well, hi, is there any coffee? Good morning", and I'm standing there in my nightgown and housecoat, saying, "It's eight o'clock in the morning and I'm feeding my little one!" (laughing). So it's quite a cultural exchange. But friendly. I got used to it.

KELLY: Your husband never prepared you for the weather?

COOKE: Absolutely NOT. Now, understand, he is in the Air Force. He was born and raised in West Texas then his mom and dad came down here. They were in Old Ocean first. So he went to high school in League City, and then he had never really lived in Sugar Land. With the Air Force he was stationed all over the world. He had forgotten how hot it was because he'd been overseas for so long. They always say 'mad dogs and Englishmen lay out in the midday sun', and we DO. We LOVE the sun because we don't see much of the sun. And of course, when he said, "Oh, the sun shines a lot over there," I'm thinking, "WOW, that's WONDERFUL. I shall get a suntan." And of course, I used to lie out in the sun. Everybody thought I was crazy because in those days, people here didn't lay out in the sun. And they don't that often now. But, I DID. I was determined to get a suntan. The only thing I did was sweat. You know, we don't sweat in England. We MIST. (laughing) I come over here and all of a sudden, you SWEAT. And you change clothes. Constantly!

KELLY: Next to the weather, what was the next hardest thing to adjust to?

COOKE: BUGS. We don't have mosquitoes in England. We have a little gnat, but the wind blows all the time, blows them away. And we have flies. There are absolutely NO poisonous snakes in England. We have some little grass snakes and what we call a green kind of adder sort of thing. But NO snakes. Roaches in an old, old home — I'd only ever seen one roach before in the museum. I'd never seen bugs like it. And bugs to me were BAD BUGS. (laughing) They weren't regular INSECTS! I saw a spider on the wall in Abilene so I called, "Tommy, there's a spider with a curly tail!" It was a scorpion of course. I sucked him up with the vacuum!

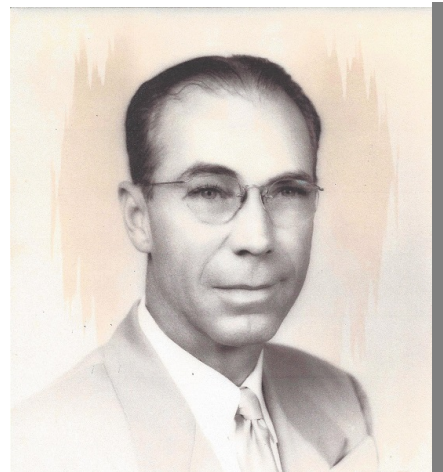
KELLY: With these major adjustments, did you ever have thoughts of saying 'I've made a mistake, I want to move home'?

COOKE: I was VERY homesick. But I'm very religious. Mother and Father were not and it's probably one of the reasons that I married a preacher's son. Tommy, my husband, was the eldest son of Reverend Robert Cooke and I liked the fact that he was a religious person. And VERY fascinating and he had a cleft in his chin. The Americans were SO different in England. The neighbors had never seen an American before. And of course, everywhere he went, he was taken into their homes. I was terribly homesick especially for THAT kind of climate and the shops.

We walk everywhere in England. I had a baby pram, we call them, like a buggy, over here. And I bought one when I got over here, and I used to walk to the store. I'd have an umbrella because it was SO hot on top of my head. And I'd look at the temperature, it was over 100 degrees! And I'm saying, "WHOA, it's a hundred degrees out here!" (laughing) And I'd go to the old drug store in the Sugar Land shopping center. They had a soda fountain there and sold ice cream. And that's the first thing we would hit when we visited; I'd go into the drug store and get an ice cream.

There was a dry goods store and a Western Auto. In England we always walked to the shops, and so I used to WALK to the shops. Plus I didn't drive, which made it hard. Especially when my husband went on tour. When we moved to Abilene, Texas Momma and Daddy moved to the NEW parsonage which was in the Belknap/Brookside housing area, on the other side of town. And when my husband went on tour to Labrador and Greenland, I came back here and rented a home on 2nd Street. The church was still the small little wooden church here. Then we left again and went to Missouri and Tommy got another isolated tour to Greenland, and I came back and I decided then that I needed something more stable. So I found a little house on Belknap right by Kyle Street. His mother and father were at the back of us.

All the homes were owned by the sugar company. One side of Terry Street are the sugar company homes, and the other side of Terry Street were privately owned homes. And supposedly, my home was the first privately owned home on THAT side of the street. It was a little old Sears and Roebuck frame home covered in trees. It was in terrible shape. Mr. and Mrs. Smith had passed away, and it was sort of held up with the will and absent members in the family. There were family members everywhere and they couldn't really sell it. But there was a little tiny hand-printed sign on the tree saying, 'For Sale'. So I went and looked at it. There were holes in the floors and the roof was in terrible shape. I said, "Well, you know, this would be good as a little first home." So I found out who owned it, called the number and asked them how much they wanted for it. Since my husband was gone, I asked my father-in-law if he'd go to the savings and loan with me and see if I could get a loan. And so he took me out there and I got this loan. It was DIFFERENT in those days.



*Reverend Robert Cooke*

My husband had left me with an old pick-up truck that my brother-in-law, Ted, used to take down to the beach at Galveston and race it! And I couldn't drive it because it was a STICK shift. So I took that old pick-up truck to Richmond. How I got there I don't know, with my three children in tow, who were age two, three and four. Walked into the Ford dealership and said, "I need a car with air conditioning and is an automatic." And he said, "Let's see what we've got." He came up with a Ford Fairlane, a blue and white, and he said, "What do you think of this?" and I said, "Well, that looks good. Has it got an air conditioner and is it an automatic?" "Yes!" He said, "Do you want to try and drive it?" I said, "No, I can't drive." I didn't even have a driver's license! I said, "But I've got a good idea how to drive because I've been practicing on this old pick-up truck."

He took me to the bank next door and they gave me the loan! As I got in the car I said, "Would you take it across the highway for me, I don't think I can get across the traffic?" (laughing) And he took me across the highway! I got in the car and the three children sat in the back seat. And I said, "Now, Mommy has to learn to drive this, so you're going to have to be REAL quiet." They all sat there, my eldest daughter, Roberta looked at the other two and said, "Don't make a sound, and don't move, 'cause Mommy can't drive." (laughs)

KELLY: (laughing) That's a good story!

COOKE: And I got home driving five miles an hour. (still laughing) But in THOSE days you could do that. And, you know, I kept that car until it absolutely fell apart. That was the BEST car I've ever had. It was so cute.

KELLY: Of people other than family, who impressed you the most in Sugar Land?

COOKE: Well, understand it was mostly around the church environment. The Hightowers were at the high school then. Jim Gary and his family lived at the back of the little house I bought. By the way, that house was supposed to be used to trade in on another house. And I'm still in it! I never could leave the little thing, you know. It was MINE. You know how it goes!

I had ALL the support systems around. The church was a very friendly church. Of course, it was probably because we were connected to the pastor, but they just were very kind. Mrs. Munson, who lived on Kyle Street, was my Sunday School teacher. She helped me get used to people. Gladys Andrews was my friend and support system.



We were visiting regularly. Even when we were living in Abilene or we were living all over the country, we'd come back and visit and go back to the church. We rented the house when we were gone. I had the Girls Auxiliary at the Baptist Church. That was probably in the '60s. So I knew a lot of the kids and helped with the Sunday School.

KELLY: Did you ever get involved with the Daughters of the British Empire here?

COOKE: (bursts out laughing) Oh that's ANOTHER story!

KELLY: Well, tell me about that! (chuckling)

COOKE: Barbara Batten took me. I was sort of quiet at that time, you know — that was BEFORE. And I walked in there and I've never heard such a noise in all my life. EVERYBODY was talking at the same time. We stayed there about two hours. I listened to every accent from the British Empire, and I came back with this pounding headache. I don't think I met but about two hundred women, and I looked at Barbara, and I said, 'WOW!' I couldn't think of anything else! And then we were transferred. Coming backwards and forwards, it was hard to really connect. I was more connected to the Air Force Wives Club and I worked. I joined the Red Cross, worked with the Red Cross for years and years in all the Air Force hospitals. I worked with the men who came back from Viet Nam so, I was VERY involved in the Air Force. We lived on base.

KELLY: Did you ever hold a job here in Texas? Or in the United States?

COOKE: When my husband left for Turkey, I opened my little house, moved in there again and started going through nurses' school here, when he was gone the second time. Then he came back and we all had to go to New York. I came back again. I decided I needed to get a job because my kids were in high school then. So I went to Sears and Roebuck for part time work for a while in their business office downtown. I decided I wanted to go into the nursing field and was trying to decide whether to be a registered nurse or a social worker. I ended up at MacGregor Medical Associates in administration. And then went into the social work field. Mostly I volunteer now with Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and I'm an advocate for abused kids. I am a Christian counselor. I go to the South Main Baptist Church. And I coordinated volunteer ministers at Southwest Memorial Hospital.

KELLY: Is there anything you would like to say, that I haven't asked?

COOKE: How Sugar Land has changed. I remember when they were building the

Southwest Freeway. We would go out there with our bikes and ride for miles. On Sunday, after church, we would get in the car and go and visit the ponies, you could ride the ponies on Main Street. Remember the old Main Street on the way to town?

KELLY: Kiddie Wonderland.

COOKE: KIDDIE WONDERLAND! I used to take the kids there to ride the ponies. It was an afternoon out, with the kids. Watching it grow, all the way from this very close-knit, almost like what I'd call a village in England, to this VERY large town. I remember when it first became a town. It is quite fascinating the way Sugar Land has grown.

KELLY: Yeah, because you came here when it was a company town.

COOKE: Yes! Everyone in our neighborhood worked for the Sugar Company.

KELLY: And you saw it incorporate, and you saw it grow into what it is today.

COOKE: Yes. And everybody who worked at the sugar company was paid to use the grocery store and the lumber company and the hardware store, and the drug store. And they went to the clinic. I remember that Jean Babineaux used to work at the clinic. And I used to go to the clinic. I used to go to Dr. Wheeler, and Dr. Wheeler, Sr.. And now I still go to his son. I said to him, not too long ago, "I've been with the Wheelers over fifty years! You've looked after my teeth over fifty years!" Amazing! The Air Force wrecked my teeth and Dr. Wheeler rescued them.

KELLY: Yes, vestiges of the old community are still here.

COOKE: Yes, yes. It's fascinating how you can still see it all around. My husband helped build the First Baptist Church, opposite the old one. We fed all the workers; a LOT of the church people worked there. And my husband worked on it too. He took some vacation time from the Air Force to work on the old church as well as the new church. All the workers that would come out there. We women would feed them. All my children and grandchildren are adults now; they all live in the Sugar Land area or close by.



*New First Baptist Church, Sugar Land, Texas*

I remember in the old First Baptist Church, once a month, at evening service they would bring the trustee's from the Prison Farm for service. That was an eye opener. It was one service the children sat quiet as mice. I told my parents in England. They would not believe me.

KELLY: It's good to hear your perspective, coming from another country. And your experiences in Sugar Land.

COOKE: I'll end by saying that my three children all graduated from Dulles High School. Roberta has been teaching at Dulles High School for 39 years. Rebecca has a company of her own and Russell has been working at S & B Engineering for 30 years. They all live close by. We have four grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

Interview Ends



*Prison Trustees attending service at First Baptist Church "back in the day"*