

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSIONER

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **James Grady Prestage**
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Interviewer: Karl Baumgartner
Transcribert: Sylvia Vacek
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Transcript:

BAUMGARTNER: Today is February 15, 2019. My name is Karl Baumgartner. I am interviewing Mr. Grady Prestage in Fort Bend County, Texas. This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Fort Bend Historical Commission of Richmond, Texas as part of their Oral History Project. By way of introduction, Mr. Prestage is an elected political representative of Fort Bend County. He serves on the Fort Bend County Commissioners Court as Commissioner of Precinct 2, a position he has held since 1990. He has retained this position by winning eight consecutive four-year term elections from 1990 – 2018.

Mr. Prestage, what is your full legal name and date of birth?

PRESTAGE: James Grady Prestage. I was born July 30th, 1958.

BAUMGARTNER: Where were your born?

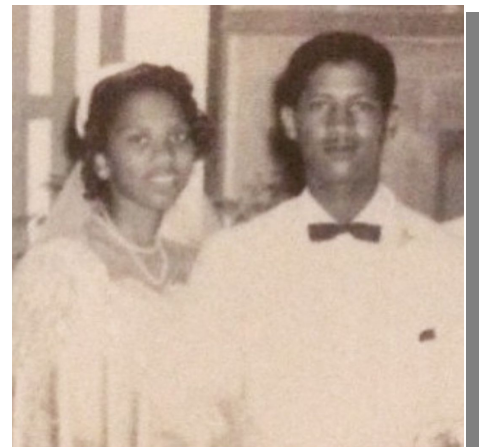
PRESTAGE: I grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana but I was born in Iowa City, Iowa. My parents who were from Louisiana were undergraduates at Southern University in Baton Rouge and they were graduate school students of the University of Iowa when I came along. Back then they could not be admitted to the majority of educational institutions in Louisiana.

BAUMGARTNER: It is before integration.

PRESTAGE: Before integration; for blacks in Louisiana, as far as public universities there were few choices for public colleges—Southern, Grambling. There were some church based colleges-- Leland College, Dillard University and Xavier University were available colleges back then but those were expensive. When my mother and father graduated from Southern they got fellowships and were admitted to graduate school at the University of Iowa but they could not go to any of the southern colleges or universities, LSU, Ole Miss, Tennessee, Alabama; but blacks were admitted as undergraduates in the Midwest schools, Michigan State, Ohio State, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. All those schools had black undergraduate students.

BAUMGARTNER: I wonder how they picked Iowa for graduate school.

PRESTAGE: They wanted to go somewhere where they both got admitted. My mother had been admitted to Oklahoma because there was some court case that allowed her to go but she would have to sit behind a partition in the classroom segregated from the white students. They were both accepted at the University of Iowa. They both got PhD's from Iowa.



*Commissioner Prestage's
Parents*

BAUMGARTNER: By coincidence my older brother went to Iowa and got his PhD there too.

PRESTAGE: I am a Hawkeye too; I was born on the campus; I was born at the university hospital.

BAUMGARTNER: So when did you move to Louisiana?

PRESTAGE: As soon as my father completed his degree, around '59, and they relocated back to their alma mater. They both were offered jobs at Southern. My father was teaching biology and my mother political science. Back then that is the way it was-- you got an undergraduate education and you went off to professional schools if you had those capabilities, but there was no incentive for you to go back home. Just like there were limited opportunities for higher education, job opportunity was just as limited. They could not take any college teaching job other than historical black colleges or universities. So they came back to their alma mater. I grew up on a college campus. I am one of five kids and every one of us graduated from Southern.

BAUMGARTNER: Did the campus have housing for the professors?

PRESTAGE: They did and there was limited housing in that part of Baton Rouge at that time, so the university provided on campus housing for faculty members, especially starting out. After you made a little money and got situated you usually moved off campus and there were some communities in the proximity of the campus that they moved into.

BAUMGARTNER: Regarding your extended family, did you have family in the area, like your grandparents? Were they from Louisiana?

PRESTAGE: My grandparents were from Alexandria, Louisiana. My parents were the first in their family to go off to college.

BAUMGARTNER: What were your mom and dad's names?

PRESTAGE: My mother was Dr. Jewel Prestage, and my father, who is still living, is 92 years old; his name is Dr. James Prestage. Both of them had long teaching careers at Southern University. My father ended up being the chancellor of the Baton Rouge campus and he retired in 1985. My mother was a political science professor, department chair; she was dean of school public policy and she retired after my father retired as chancellor. She took a teaching job at Prairie View, came to Prairie View from 1989 to 2002. My father took a job at Dillard University in New Orleans. He went back into the classroom to teach biology and retired in 1997. They both relocated to the northwest Part of Houston. My mother passed in 2014, and my father at age 92 is doing well. They still have a family homestead in Baton Rouge. For all practical purposes my father has lived here for the past 22 years.

BAUMGARTNER: Around Missouri City?

PRESTAGE: In the Cypress area.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you have siblings?

PRESTAGE: I have two brothers and two sisters. My sister just recently retired as an insurance executive in Miami and is married to a US magistrate judge who just retired. I have a sister who is in Baton Rouge who works for the State of Louisiana and who is married to a former professional football player and now a coach. I have a brother who is an engineer with General Motors in Detroit and I have a brother who is a teacher in Pearland. Everybody has done well.

BAUMGARTNER: Why did your mom and dad have the initiative and the drive to go to college? I would guess that your mother was pretty exceptional.

PRESTAGE: My mother was exceptional; my mother graduated from high school at 16 and college at 18 and got a PhD at 22. She was exceptional, but they had teachers who had been trained at Southern and Grambling who were said to be the brightest students who got to college. You could go to college and college was affordable. Louisiana, in spite of the bad rap they get these days, had an excellent system, with very inexpensive colleges and the transportation infrastructure to get there.

BAUMGARTNER: You wouldn't think of it that way because it doesn't fit the Louisiana reputation.

PRESTAGE: At my alma mater at Southern during the '70's you could have a student who lived eighty or one hundred miles away, who would get on the bus in the morning, free bus, go to campus, have classes and catch the early bus and go home by two or catch the later one and be home by five. You didn't have to live on campus and you could still be going to school. My first semester in college, fall of 1976, the tuition and fees for a fulltime student was \$168.00 and if you stayed on campus, room and board, all in, it was about \$900.00 for a semester. There were plentiful educational grants back then so if you qualified financially you got that paid for. So you could have a student who could be in Bastrop, Louisiana and catch a bus and ride fifty miles to campus and have a full load or arrange classes so that he only went Monday, Wednesday and Friday or two days a week or three days a week and go home. Tuition was inexpensive, and four years later you got a degree and you get a job working at the school at your alma mater. If you wanted to advance you find somewhere to get to a graduate program or you could just be a career teacher. It was a good situation in Louisiana.

A generation of people got educated just like that, but slowly the cost started going up and costs kept going up and now it is \$5,000.00 or \$6,000.00 a semester.

BAUMGARTNER: It must have been a pretty big change of pace for your parents to go to Iowa from Louisiana.

PRESTAGE: Cold and isolated but there were a lot of other students in their position so they found their little network; a lot of them were up there for the same reason and they stayed in touch professionally throughout their careers. So many family friends my parents met at Iowa and they stuck together and it was a good deal. They made the adjustment; you have to do what you have to do. My mother actually went back in the '80's for a year as a visiting professor but it was too cold for her.

BAUMGARTNER: As far as integration, was that traumatic or a big deal?

PRESTAGE: It was tough in a lot of schools. I did not have the same situation because the place I was in at school was a bubble. We were isolated from that. I went to a school called Southern University Laboratory School, which is a K-12 school actually located on the Southern University campus. It was part of the Department of Education.

BAUMGARTNER: What did they call it?

PRESTAGE: Southern University Laboratory School. The College of Education in those times at the university was the biggest department because that was the one thing you could major in and gain immediate employment. They were sustained, and computer science did not exist. There were sciences, yes, but they were typically for the few people who were able to go to professional schools, dental schools and medical schools. Most of the education at that time was to prepare you to be a teacher. That was how you could get gainfully employed. Those students could come and get a degree and go back to their hometowns and be instantly respected middle class teachers, employed.

My childhood school was part of the College of Education. Most of my teachers were PhD's. In high schools, a good quality education was semi private; schools could select the students they wanted and so they recruited the best students from the Baton Rouge area, and they also recruited musicians and athletes. It was a small school, graduating class of 64, a real small, small, small school. I went there from kindergarten through twelfth grade and I attended the university for four and half years. So I never left the university. I had a very sheltered supported educational environment; I don't have the story that I walked ten miles to school.

In Baton Rouge, going to Southern University Laboratory School was probably one of the best things a middle class family could do besides the parochial schools which were more expensive. I was sheltered. I lived in a nice brick home, my parents were fine, they were one step from poverty, both grew up very, very poor and so they had an appreciation for things and they let us know that all the time.

They would find a good student and they would get them into a professional school. My father who was in biology would get them into dental school or medical school and my mother would get them in law school and support their PhD program. She took pride in the number of PhD's that she produced. They did that a lot. They were constant mentors for us to help everybody, so that is what

they rubbed off on me.

BAUMGARTNER: Exposure to an environment like that is such a blessing.

PRESTAGE: It is a blessing. I grew up in an upper middle class household. My parents were PhD's, college professors and we were exposed to everything from literature to travel, to inspirational figures. It was a model upbringing.

BAUMGARTNER: What was your high school like, did you run for office or were you already interested in politics then?

PRESTAGE: I ran for senior class president, played sports, did band and everything. We had every opportunity and college was thirteenth grade, no if ands or buts; you are going to college.

BAUMGARTNER: When were the schools integrated in Louisiana?

PRESTAGE: The schools integrated around 1970 or 1971 and it was somewhat of a peaceful process. A lot of court cases were coming down and Baton Rouge had such a large black population and they tried their best to avoid what happened in some other southern cities like Birmingham and places like that. It was a more peaceful transition in Baton Rouge than it was in some other southern places.

BAUMGARTNER: Of course different parts of the country initiated the process at different times; I grew up in Stillwater, Oklahoma and we went through integration but that was about fifteen years earlier than you. We integrated in Stillwater in 1957.

PRESTAGE: We had our own little community. We had everything in our community there and as a young boy it was mostly before the public facilities were integrated. My parents did an excellent job of sheltering us from things that weren't that positive. The places we would go out to eat, when we did that, we didn't have a lot back then, everybody ate at home. There were places that you could not order in the front but you had to order in the back. We used to go there and when we traveled there were places you did not want to stop because you didn't want to be treated that way. My parents would say it was a flea bag hotel, you do not want to go there or the food is nasty you do not want to go there and even my pediatrician that we used to go to and for years we would go around to the colored waiting room and I didn't know it until I was much older. I took my younger brother to a doctor and we went into the front door and I always wondered why we went around back. My parents would say that is where our parking spot was and I did not know that they sheltered us from those types of things.

BAUMGARTNER: Did the black parents try to do that with their children or were your parents a little special as far as sheltering you?

PRESTAGE: It was a coping skill and everybody wanted what was best for their children and sometimes going along was the thing that was best for you. Parents always shelter you from that. It was just the way it was, the way of life in the Deep South. That was in the early sixties, mid-sixties when I was a young boy.

So I was sheltered from all of that and my parents did an excellent job of helping us make that transition. There were schools that were two blocks from our house; our house was on the last street in the black neighborhood, a working class white neighborhood that started the next street over and we could not go to their school. At the time we were older and things had changed we did not want to go there. But that was kind of the way it was. As soon as integration happened that neighborhood changed from almost a totally white neighborhood to a black neighborhood probably in about two or three years; it just totally flipped. Those that could move moved and those that could not move stayed there until they could move and the houses sold. That was the way of life.

When they integrated the schools a lot of the parents, black families, felt that going to traditional white schools now they get a good education. So they do that. Everybody wants to do what is best for the kids so you try to give them the best you can. There were growing pains there, change was slow and there was resistance, kids were not used to being around each other. Folks got along and it happened. Public accommodations happened real fast because it is about the money. They get used to it.

AFTER COLLEGE GRADUATION

BAUMGARTNER: Following college graduation, then what did you do?

PRESTAGE: With an undergraduate degree in civil engineering, I graduated in 1980 and Houston presented all the great job opportunities. During high school I had opportunities to co-op or work summer jobs at various companies and so when I decided to go into civil engineering a lot of opportunities opened up. I took an entry level job here in the Houston area and my wife Fheryl finished a semester before me with a degree in computer science and she took a job in the Houston area so that is where I was going.

BAUMGARTNER: So moving to Houston was relatively seamless?

PRESTAGE: I graduated on a Friday, moved on the weekend and started work on Monday and got married the following weekend. It was seamless. You had newlyweds with an engineering salary and a computer science salary so we could afford a home and not



rent. In looking for a home we accidentally stumbled on Fort Bend County in 1981. We did not know where a county line started or stopped and all we knew is that they had houses out South Main, drive till you found a house. So we went house hunting and ended up in one of the Fort Bend County neighborhoods. Within three months of my moving here we bought a home and we did not understand where we were when we bought. That is the best decision we ever made. And I got involved in a lot of activities.

BAUMGARTNER: In Missouri City?

PRESTAGE: Actually it was in the City of Houston with a Missouri City mailing address. We bought the home there in 1981 and have lived in the area ever since. I have two children; I have a 36 year old son and a 25 year old daughter. My son, Justin recently moved to Brooklyn, New York. My daughter, Erin who is a PR person works for a charter school, Harmony Schools. My wife is co-vice chancellor at Houston Community College.

BAUMGARTNER: So you majored in engineering?

PRESTAGE: Civil Engineering.

BAUMGARTNER: What does a civil engineer do?

PRESTAGE: Roads, bridges, drainage, structures, and that kind of stuff.

BAUMGARTNER: Is that oil business related?

PRESTAGE: I worked for a pipeline company for a stretch there and I was in pipeline design and the structures involved with that. Those pipelines have to cross rivers, and go under roads and those kind of things and there are all kind of facilities that are associated with that business that a civil engineer would be involved in.

ENTERING THE POLITICAL ARENA

BAUMGARTNER: So how and why did you decide to enter politics and run for county commissioner, or was that just you?

PRESTAGE: I am a busybody and I am a pleaser and this is a position you can actually be involved in things and you can help people and it had a salary associated with it too. So it was a good fit for me and I was able to garner enough support and enough people followed me and supported me to get elected. I had always been involved in student government in high school and college.

Being a political person growing up in a household where my mother was a political science professor, I was always exposed to the politics in academia. My father being an administrator at the uni-

versity is very, very political, because you have to get your money from the legislators, you have to make friends and put on a good face to make the money especially when there is competition for those state dollars.

I really think that prepared me a lot. At Southern I ran for student government president. I didn't win but the stakes were very high for a student government president when I was an undergraduate. The student government president would have a seat on the University Board of Regents, the student government president got tuition and fees and a book stipend and a \$250.00 a month stipend. You get a chance to travel with the team, you got your wardrobe, you promoted the concerts, all those student activities you are involved with and you could give other people jobs that work in the student government office. It was a very, very coveted position and the campaign was a good experience.

In Missouri City I got involved with some of the local politics pretty early. I volunteered to assist for the Constable Race and Justice of the Peace race. I witnessed a race for County Commissioner in 1982. When I saw the quality and the caliber of the election effort for these positions and I compared the two to student government, it could not hold a candle to what we did in student government. So I looked at the demographics of the area and I felt like that could be a position that I could be competitive in.

I immediately got involved with my homeowners association and became civic club president at 24 years old. Then I got involved in politics here as a candidate when actually oddly enough 1984 came around and Jesse Jackson decided to run for president. Jesse Jackson was winning almost all the democratic delegates with the Illinois caucus system, statewide he did real well. Texas had a caucus system, and if you wanted to vote in a presidential primary, you just couldn't go and vote the names on the ballot, you had to do a caucus like Iowa. To participate in a caucus system you had to vote during the primary and when the polls close at seven you would convene a precinct convention. It was a system that was set up which really favored party insiders because they knew the rules and they could manipulate what was going on. I learned the process because I volunteered on the campaign. I got ahold of the manual on how you run a precinct convention. When election came we had an overwhelming response from African American voters who wanted to vote in a presidential primary and no one knew what the process was.

BAUMGARTNER: Has that process changed?

PRESTAGE: It was modified to change this system. As a result of knowing the rules and becoming an instant leader and guiding everyone through this process, I pretty much found my core support base, the people who were delegates through that process. Those are the people who met with me in my living room in late 1984 when I decided I was going to run for county commissioner. It was a core of my campaign.

I ran for commissioner in 1986 and I ran against a democratic incumbent. There were six

candidates in the race and I got a plurality of the votes without a majority and I was in a run off against the incumbent and I lost by 92 votes. It was a very, very close race.

So I learned county government pretty quickly after I moved here. From reference material that was around, I used to go and research old election results at the court house. All the election results were in a big ledger. Open it up and all hand written results on the pages and you had to sit there and transcribe the election results if you wanted that information.

BAUMGARTNER: That was at the Fort Bend County Courthouse?

PRESTAGE: Fort Bend County and at that time the County Clerk was the election administrator. They became very familiar with me because every time I had the day off or if I got off early I would go down and look at election results.

BAUMGARTNER: Who was that; was that Dianne Wilson? She was County Clerk for 32 years.

PRESTAGE: Dianne Wilson was the County Clerk and election administrator. Fort Bend had probably only 70,000 people, I wasn't in a county that was a million and half of people like Harris County. It was great, it was a smaller setting and I learned quickly the structure of county government and I saw a lot of opportunities.

BAUMGARTNER: Who was the incumbent in that 1986 election?

PRESTAGE: A guy by the name of Ben Denham and so I came back four years later. It was a run off again but I won that time in 1990. Since then I have had one opponent, all the time, and the same guy all three times, only one opponent. I was unopposed in 1994 and I had an opponent in the Democratic Primary in 1998 and 2002. The same guy filed to run as a republican in 2006 so I beat him in the general election. Each time I got 71% of the votes. He is the only challenger that I had in this position; 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018 I was unopposed. I just got re-elected this past November.

BAUMGARTNER: That is pretty remarkable.

PRESTAGE: It was a great run.

BAUMGARTNER: When you got involved in politics in '86 and '90, how did you get your base? Was it because of your knowledge in the caucus?

PRESTAGE: My first core base was from the delegates through that process. That was my core base.

And I had my own community. I was civic president in my own neighborhood which was a good base. I had other networks that I tied into: my church, my fraternity, my alumni association; those kinds of things I had basic support.

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COURT

BAUMGARTNER: So at age 32 you became an important elected county official, a county commissioner.

PRESTAGE: For the people who lived in the district, this was all new to them. Most of the people who moved to Fort Bend County did not know what a county commissioner was because the commissioners catered to the rural areas. They did know what this was and they came from everywhere else. People came to Houston and Missouri City and Fort Bend County from all over the country to take oil and gas jobs, and they did not know. Somebody comes out here from Chicago and they say "County commissioner, I know what a Cook County commissioner is in Chicago; I don't know what they do for me here."

And communication wasn't like it is now. With the internet you can have all the information you want. Back then if you moved into Missouri City in let's say 1978 to take a job with Shell Oil and you work in Houston during the daytime and you come home, when do you ever confront or deal with a county commissioner? You have a city council and you might know who that person is, but the county? There were no county parks, or county community centers.

In one respect that I was fortunate, the county experienced rapid growth. In 1970 Fort Bend County had about 70,000 residents, 1980 130,000, 1992 125,000, 2000 we had 354,000, 2010 we had 645,000 or something like that, so we are 800,000- plus now. We will probably be close to around 900,000 at the next census with a million shortly thereafter.

BAUMGARTNER: How does that make a difference?

PRESTAGE: The County grew real fast and we went from a rural county that was concerned with rural things to a suburban/urban county with urban concerns. The focus went from the county commissioner dealing with rural asphalt roads to toll roads, libraries and community centers and we expanded the jail and juvenile justice complexes; the things that the urban county will deal with.



County officials on steps of the Fort Bend County Justice Center (Fort Bend Independent, May 25, 2011)

Being here on commissioner's court when it happened, I was able to offer input and get us involved with some things that we typically wouldn't get involved with such as parks.

When I got elected, Precinct 2 covered Needville, Kendleton, Beasley, and half of Rosenberg.

BAUMGARTNER: Really, I've lived on the west side of the Brazos a long time and didn't know that.

PRESTAGE: It covered Arcola, and Fresno; it was the biggest precinct in the county. Traditionally in the county for decades you had a commissioner from Richmond and Rosenberg area, a commissioner from Needville, a commissioner from Fulshear, and the fourth commissioner is what we call the east side, Stafford and Fresno and Missouri City and Sugar Land because that is where the population was. Those were the four commissioners.

Precinct 2 was Needville and Ben Denham claimed Needville as his home because he had a little rent house there but he had a house in Fresno. He claimed Needville and got elected. The area went from Arcola, Fresno all around the county and covered this huge area; probably two thirds of the county was in Precinct 2. Shortly after I got elected we had the census of 1990 and we got the census results in the fall of '91, and in '92 we drew precinct lines on the county map and did redistricting and it made no sense to keep Needville, Kendleton and Rosenberg in Precinct 2. All of Precinct 2 is on this side of the river.

BAUMGARTNER: It is a funky shaped looking district...

PRESTAGE: It was a big deal and I wish you could have seen how it looked at first. So at that time I went from having all this rural territory to having almost all incorporated developed area.

BAUMGARTNER: So you don't have the roads and all that stuff.

PRESTAGE: I have hardly any county roads at all. I would say maybe 12 miles of roads. I probably had 200 miles of roads at first. Then we went to another redistricting in 2000 and changed it some more; 2010 changed it again. It is about to change again when the census in 2020 is done. In about sixteen months we will get the census report and my next election will be on new lines. In 2022 we will have new lines. Fortunately I am at the table and "Every day is Election Day."

BAUMGARTNER: Is there one thing compared to the old days that has changed the most in your precinct that stands out as a lot different from when you were elected?

PRESTAGE: Yes. The urban city dweller has different expectations and needs than the rural constituent. It has made my job easier! In Missouri City and Stafford and Houston, the cities in my precinct, the City Council is their first level of government. I was secondary; when I got elected I had all this rural area and the residents needed everything; every problem imaginable. They want everything. Most of the city people just want to be left alone, don't tax me too much. It is different

and makes the job easier. I do not deal with road issues and those kinds of things. It is just not part of my deal so I focus on other things.

That is disappearing in the whole county because everywhere is getting urbanized. It is a big difference. If a developer puts down a concrete street with curb and gutter, it is thirty years before you have to deal with it for the most part before it starts falling apart. An asphalt road out in the county with farming combines on it all the time is going to tear up and you have to deal with it next year. We went from high maintenance constituents to low maintenance constituents. There are other concerns, other things like crime that they want you to deal with, not necessarily my road side ditches and drainage. It is different kind of demands.

BAUMGARTNER: Are the people more difficult to deal with out in the rural areas, old timer Czech farmers, older generations set in their ways?

PRESTAGE: Yes, they can be tough. I learned right away that I could pave those streets in gold and I was not going to make them all happy. So I just go with the flow and treat it like what it is.

BAUMGARTNER: Some things never change.

PRESTAGE: Some things never change, but I get smarter and I am not quick to make judgments but I have seen enough of this to know who is full of it and who is not. Some people just want to talk, that is fine, and I will talk all day. And some people want to fight; if you want to fight, fight by yourself. I cut them off.

BAUMGARTNER: What are examples of major areas where Commissioners play an important role in urban areas?

PARKS

PRESTAGE: When I got on Commissioners Court the prevailing attitude was that we are not in the parks business: We do not do parks. I said "why not" and they said "We just do not do parks." And I said what are you going to do for the urban constituent? If you have voters who live in the cities, who do not drive the asphalt roads, and you are not involved with the asphalt roads, what are you going to do for them?

BAUMGARTNER: Usually they do not care.

PRESTAGE: They do not care. At some point of time they are going to ask that question--What good are you to me, and they are going to try to find someone who will address their concerns. So fast forward to today; every commissioner is breaking his neck trying to find a park in their area because they know that there are good quality of life issues and people want it and appreciate those things.

BAUMGARTNER: Missouri City has a great park system.

PRESTAGE: They have a great park system and cities do that well. The County has a growing and emerging park system, we have Kitty Hollow Park, a big regional park, we have a park in Kendleton, park in Fresno, and we have community centers.

BAUMGARTNER: What is the park in Kendleton? Is that Bates Allen?

PRESTAGE: Bates Allen Park. I started Bates Allen Park when it was in my precinct. As a result of re-districting I lost it, but I started the park project while it was in my precinct and I had to let it go.

BAUMGARTNER: Really? That is a very nice outdoor facility.

PRESTAGE: It is a pretty piece of land, and it is totally flat and it is the only one that has little roads to get up to it down there. I was proud of Bates Allen Park.

BAUMGARTNER: Kitty Hollow Park is also a neat park.

PRESTAGE: Bates Allen Park is one that was owned by Herman Hospital Estate and it was a place where their corporate friends would go hunting and fishing and it was not condoned for charity and those kinds of things, so it was an odd form of asset for them. We just so happened to need it for retention basins to retain flood water that was occurring because of all this rapid house development so there would be a place for the water to go until it had time to run off. So that was the plan. We purchased that land from the Herman Hospital Estate for a retention basin, 455 acres. We got a Texas Parks & Wildlife grant to kind of help us get going and we matched with county labor and we built the park. It was a very nice project and it still functions as a retention basin. In a major flood event everything in there is designed to go underwater for a short period of time until it runs off. We have only developed less than half of it. Half of the land is still available for future expansion if we ever get to that point.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you work with Paul Wierzbicki?

PRESTAGE: He is the parks director from Missouri City. Not as much, I have worked with park directors in the past because we were trying to get our parks department going but they pretty well do their thing and we do our thing, so we do not have a lot of interaction there. When I was elected each commissioner had their own parks function if they wanted? In the mid '80's we consolidated all of the Road and Bridge functions and created a parks department. That was because of politics. There was a group of residents who got upset about something, and they challenged the system and started a petition to consolidate all Road and Bridge operations. By that time I had three parks and I had all kind of things I was doing, and I think I had enough public support and it was going

to pass if it got on the ballot, so the commissioners voted to do it voluntarily. I asked that we create a Parks Department and that happened. Some of the assets from the Road and Bridge Department were transferred to the Park Department to get them started, some of the personnel and some of the equipment and some of the budget money.

BAUMGARTNER: I knew the County unified the Road and Bridge Department but I did not realize there was a county Parks Department.

PRESTAGE: My Road and Bridge superintendent became the parks director. I was the big park component early on. Now everyone wants a park, they are popular with the public.

LIBRARIES

Libraries are another thing we got into. The county did not have many libraries until the George Foundation gave the county money for the George Memorial Library in Richmond. It created some library envy so all the other parts of the county said we want a library too.

BAUMGARTNER: Is that a county facility?

PRESTAGE: The George Memorial is a county library but it was paid for by the George Foundation. At the time it was an 8 million dollar library which in 1986 or 1987 was a lot of money. Shortly thereafter the county had a bond election for 10.6 million dollars for branch libraries. That 10.6 million dollars built the Missouri City Branch Library, The First Colony Branch Library, Sugar Land Branch Library, The Bob Lutz Fulshear Library, and they made improvements to Albert George Library in Needville, the Mamie George Library in Stafford, and the George Memorial Library. We did all that for 10.6 million dollars. Nowadays a decent library costs you 10 million.

That got us in the library business, the George Foundation started it, got us going, got us addicted to libraries.. After that we built one in Cinco Ranch, we built one at University in Sugar Land, built one in Sienna Plantation, and we just opened one in the Mission Bend area last weekend. We are about to build one in Fulshear pretty soon. We have libraries in all the popular parts of the county right now.

BAUMGARTNER: This is off the subject a little bit but how did Bob Lutz get a library named after him?

PRESTAGE: When Bob Lutz was first elected he beat a commissioner who was from Fulshear. Lutz' base was Fulshear though he lived in Sugar Land; but all the rural roads were in Fulshear, his office was there, he was the Fulshear commissioner. When he decided to retire we worked a deal out to get his library built. That was his swan song; he wanted to see a library built there. We made a deal to accelerate the development of that library; we tried to stage it over time so that the building and staffing would not be a problem. We decided to name it after Lutz when he retired; he

was sick and within two years he died of lung cancer. And so we named it in his honor. It was fitting. He did a lot to help us to keep up with the rural growth.

BAUMGARTNER: Back in those days who would have thought that Fulshear was going to look the way it is today. It was just a little crossroads.

PRESTAGE: Back when we built the library we did not build a big one because it was so far out. Now we are going to build another one because the population justifies it. The site has not been determined yet. It is somewhere between old downtown Fulshear and some of the new developments like Cross Creek Ranch or some of those new planned communities that are out there.

COMMUNITY CENTERS

BAUMGARTNER: I am told that you have done quite a bit of innovative development such as the Pinnacle health center for seniors and other community centers.

PRESTAGE: We did to adapt to the county's growth and development from a rural county to an urban county. We started doing community centers and without having a staff to run them we partnered with the Boys and Girls Club. They have expertise in that, so we do the brick and mortar and they do the programming. It is a good combination. All these activities going on serves all the children and my precinct get the credit. It is a good deal. We build a building and put a name on the building but most kids see the Boys and Girls Club. It is a good combination and we evolved into that kind of thing. We figured out that we do some things well and some things we do not. At running programs we are weak.



*Commissioner Prestage at the
Stafford Boys & Girls Club*

MOBILITY, FLOODING, DRAINING DISTRICT

BAUMGARTNER: What other kind of continuing issues do you oversee?

PRESTAGE: Convenience and basic services, you've got to have that. And they want more-- mobility is a big deal now because there used to be a time when you could drive around and get there quick. Now it is almost a struggle going anywhere. So mobility is a big deal.

And flooding, this happens only in a blue moon but blue moons happen a lot lately, and everyone is concerned about flooding. So when you have rapid growth in areas that would normally retain water or a lot of water running off, now you have rooftops on top of it, and then you put a strain on the ability to drain. The county is a flat county with a big uncontrollable river running right through the middle of it and when it rains real hard in Waco, give it a couple of days and it arrives down here. A lot of the areas are protected by levees, but some of the banks that aren't, that are natural channels, are eroding.

BAUMGARTNER: So do you have a lot to do with the flooding issue?

PRESTAGE: Yes. In addition to being a commissioner, each member of the Commissioners Court is a Director of the Drainage District. The county voted in the 1940's to create a County Drainage District and the commissioners are the board of directors for the Fort Bend County Drainage District. We make decisions on all these lines. The Brazos River I have been told drains forty per cent of the state. Some of our drainage on the east side will go to Sims Bayou or the ship channel but most of it comes right through the Brazos River or San Bernard River in Kendleton and all that. We are responsible for drainage. It is a big deal when you have these major storms.

When you develop a subdivision and you put a levee on one side of the river, Mother Nature is going to do what it is going to do. When there is no levee on the other side of the river all the water is going to go to that side. We have to be concerned with that. The Levee Districts are individual separate legal entities. Some of them will appoint Board of Directors but they are going to be peripheral, that is they are concerned with the development that they are responsible for, not the one on the other side of the river and not the one downstream. So we have to be in a coordination role in those cases when it is a regular course of activity we are engaged in. But when it is an emergency it is marshal law, it is the county judge. The county judge unilaterally is the management coordinator and not the county commissioners. You have to have one person in charge. We stand down. Now it is Judge Lina Hidalgo of Harris County and Judge KP George of Fort Bend County. That is the way it is and you stand down. That occurs in a whole lot of special circumstances but in the normal course of activity we are involved, to try to make policies and make improvements for the county to drain.

SPECIAL ISSUES

BAUMGARTNER: What about when special events occur from time to time that call for decisions of the Commissioners Court, like the recent Sugar Land cemetery matter?

Editor's Note: An unrecognized cemetery was discovered on public property in the Sugar Land area, adjoining the State of Texas Prison System facilities, and a dispute arose as to the disposition of the graves and the public entity responsible for the matter.

PRESTAGE: I think we need to put to sleep the whole issue with the ninety five bodies that were found there, and I think we are.

BAUMGARTNER: You know the Fort Bend County Historical Commission got thrown in the middle of that. It was a political can of worms because of legal uncertainties. The Commission was called upon to render a decision.

PRESTAGE: But you know that they gave us some cover; there is now a plan for us to go in and we will run it as a park. What had to be determined was the historical significance. The Commission asserted that yes it is, it has historical significance, and they went one step further and said the school district needs to do something. They established the fact that this is something you cannot brush over. It is important. So that gave us the cover that we needed to go out and say we are prepared to take it over and make it a memorial park. The school district had problems with their legal authority for actually running a cemetery and doing anything about it. That was a real concern and now it is off the table. The plan is that they are going to convey the property to us and some resources to move forward and we are going to have perpetual responsibility for it.

We are going to be meeting with the school district in small groups in an effort to bring agreement back to the commissioner's court in a few weeks. Then they would convey the property to us and it would be our responsibility

BAUMGARTNER: That would be great.

PRESTAGE: We hope for the best solution; it gets it out of the newspapers, and off the national news.

COMMISSIONERS COURT MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

BAUMGARTNER: How do you guys work, the commissioners, as far as voting on facilities or something that is going to take place in someone else's precinct?

PRESTAGE: Usually honor and respect each other and we are elected from civic member precincts. When we vote on something for the good of the county we usually come together and make decisions on what is best for the county.

BAUMGARTNER: As a matter of history, or maybe just my observation, I don't really follow it that closely, but haven't the county commissioners always gotten along fairly well together and worked together compared to our city councils which are a joke?

PRESTAGE: Here is the difference. County commissioners are full time and city council members and school board members are part time. They get little or no compensation. The school board has no compensation and city council may have small stipends to come to meetings. You have someone

that works a regular job and has a regular vocation and they get together once a week or once every two weeks and have a meeting. They have professionals who run the city, the city managers, and they have superintendents who run the school districts. So when you come together there is a lot more to debate because you do not know what is going on, you get briefed a couple of days before on what is on the agenda and they usually don't answer your questions until you get there.

We are full time. There is no reason for me to wait until Tuesday afternoon to ask a question. I can pick up the phone and ask a department head or ask a commissioner what is this, so I got my answer. Unless I just want to hear myself talk I can get the answer. Our meetings are very efficient because we do this every day. Every day we eat, drink and sleep the job and we are paid a decent salary and we get the answers. Also, unlike a city where they have ordinance- making power and they have zoning, our stuff is pretty structured and straight. You are either going to fix the pot hole or you are not. It is not a Democratic pot hole, Republican pot hole, rural pot hole or urban pot hole --it is a problem. You are going to fix it or not and if you do not want to fix it then let's go on to the next crisis.

We don't have much to argue about or deliberate about. It is like you have to pay the bills or not; or are you going to build a library and how much, OK. Alright let's do it. It is very efficient because we are full time. We have staff that can research things that can do citizen assistance.

BAUMGARTNER: It is still pretty gratifying that more personality conflicts do not come up, because you see so much of it in other different arenas. It's a mark of good leadership.

PRESTAGE: That is also a function of the Fort Bend County economy. It would be different if we were in a situation where we had declining population and declining budgets and money was tighter. Our budget goes up all the time and we have more responsibility coming at us but we have the wealth to do it. If we had to arm wrestle over money then it would be different but we have not had to do that if the deal is right. So you think, do we need this, is it important, will the public support it and if so, do it.

BAUMGARTNER: In the neighboring county did you see the article in the Chronicle this morning about the Harris County Commissioners Court meetings that they have been taking place with the new commissioners?

Editor's Note: In Harris County, in the November 2018 midterm election, Democrats routed the opposition by voting a straight Democratic ticket. Democrats won all of 59 judicial seats that were on the ballot; and the Judge of County Commissioners Court as well as a precinct commissioner was defeated in the landslide. Similarly, in Fort Bend County Commissioners Court, long-term Republican County Judge Bob Hebert and Precinct 3 Commissioner James Patterson were replaced; both were long term representatives who were favorably regarded in the community.

PRESTAGE: The new Harris County commissioners are having longer meetings.

BAUMGARTNER: The paper reported it is like ten hours.

PRESTAGE: They have some growing pains. We had a four and half hour meeting last month.

BAUMGARTNER: That is a long meeting for you guys.

PRESTAGE: That is long for us; it was because we were dealing with some issues that we don't frequently deal with. They were resolutions in support of certain legislation. Something we almost never do.

The county is a political subdivision of the state. We don't have any ordinance making power and we can only do what the State laws say we can do. So every session of legislature we are trying to get the right to do certain things and we also trying to prevent them from asking us to do things that they don't give money for, and there are some things that we want to do to make government in urban counties easier.

So we submit resolutions to the legislature supporting legislation we think will benefit the county. We had a long meeting because we dealt with some of those issues and thank goodness we don't have to do that every two years. We got it over with and done and we moved on. Harris County they have some adjustments and they got two new members just like we do and a lot of it had to do with personalities that we have.

We have seen and know how pleasant it can be when you work together and we want to keep it that way. For Harris County I think the personalities are a little bit stronger and they have some growing up to do.

BAUMGARTNER: What was County Judge Bob Hebert like to work with? Of course he has been retired following the Democratic landslide in the mid-term election.

PRESTAGE: I see a very competent man that runs successful companies, pretty well educated and stable. He wasn't the most personable person, you never know how he feels but he is all right. He always made sound decisions and he did not have as much interaction with the commissioners so to speak. Usually the commissioners would bring the deal to present to the Court and often time's people would go to him and he would say "Go deal with the commissioner and come back." That was good advice. He did not have to worry about trying to present something that we were in support of.

BAUMGARTNER: Did he play a tie breaker's role?

PRESTAGE: No. He voted on every issue. In the course of a year if we had five, six votes that were not unanimous I would be surprised.

BAUMGARTNER: That is how it appears from the outside.

PRESTAGE: You could debate anything if you wanted to, every little issue you can but you normally would be debating by yourself. The others would let you pop off and have your say so but let's just move on. Because next week, if you ruffle somebody's feathers, next week you are going to need them, so why even go that route? It takes a little bit of fine tuning and adjustment to do that. It is so much better when folks work together.

BAUMGARTNER: Commissioner James Patterson, what was he like?

PRESTAGE: Great. Everyone played their roles. He was very, very tight. The tightest man I ever met in my entire life.

BAUMGARTNER: Really, you mean with money.

PRESTAGE: He probably has the first dollar he ever made, tight. He always pulls back and so he played a role. He played a role. One thing he prides himself on, we all did, just be a man of your word. If you are going to do it, say you are going to do it, stick with it and don't tell me you are going to do something and then flip flop.

BAUMGARTNER: That is what we are missing in Washington.

PRESTAGE: That is what we have on commissioner's court. We have that kind of integrity. If you are not going to vote for it, just tell me. I always use this phrase: when you are trying to talk to someone and trying to get support, if the answer is yes then it is no; if answer is yes, then it's no. If I said Karl I really need your support on this thing and you say Grady I like those kind of things, the moon is red but I never heard you say yes.... That means the answer is no, and you get your feelings hurt when you say I talked to Karl and when the vote comes up and I turn to Karl and he does not make eye contact with me then I know that the answer is yes but it is no. A politician can give you an answer that sounds like yes, feels like yes, but not yes so it is no.

Another thing to watch out for is don't put anything on the agenda that you do not have the votes for already in place. I am not saying legally canvassing votes, but if you put something out there and no one knows about it and you do not have a sense on where it is going or it is not something you typically do, why don't you wait? Wait until you get a good feel for whether this is going to pass or not. Save yourself the aggravation.

BAUMGARTNER: Now this is stuff you have learned over the years.

PRESTAGE: That is something I learned growing up but it is specifically applicable to this job. You are elected by the people. You can't intimidate the other members, you can't shame them, you can't sell what you want through the media, and you have to deal with them in their feelings and their

beliefs just like your family. You have to find some common ground. Everybody has things that they want to do and they care about. Find out what it is so when your pet project comes up or your issue comes up they will support you. You have to build a relationship. This is my fifth county judge I am on right now and I have seen a variety of commissioners.

BAUMGARTNER: With the commissioners there is tremendous longevity of their tenures.

PRESTAGE: Because most of the votes you have don't make the people angry. If you have land control and zoning you could tell Karl Baumgartner you can't build this barn because this is zoned residential and this is commercial, so I am sorry. You are not going to be happy because if you tell someone that you can't do what they want to do with their land or if I pass an ordinance that you can't paint your barn red. These are some prime examples. We do not have that authority so it is easy to say that I am not getting involved with it.

I am a history buff. I have studied a lot on what has happened down here, before I got here and how things evolved. I have taken particular note of things that have happened since I have been here because the newest members of the commissioner's court have no clue about some of the stuff that happened twenty years ago or twenty five years ago; but having lived through it I always share with them the history on how we got to a certain spot.

BAUMGARTNER: Do you have any words of wisdom to people on how to stay in office for 28 years or what you need to do to be a successful politician?

PRESTAGE: To stay in office for 28 years never stop running for office, it's a permanent campaign. During a campaign you are aware of everything that is going on, you do not want to miss anything, you do not want to ignore anybody and if you keep that frame of mind every day, then you will be alright. That is what I am saying: never stop campaigning, every day is Election Day. You might be a commissioner, or city councilman, or school board member...its 24/7. When you are in the grocery store, you are in church, you are at the post office, you are at work, just never forget that you are a public servant. Every day is Election Day. And they will eventually get tired of you.

BAUMGARTNER: Tired of you?

PRESTAGE: Oh, yeah. My day is coming.

BAUMGARTNER: It's just like football coach Bum Phillips said?

PRESTAGE: Two kinds of Coaches, those that are going to be fired and those that already got fired.

BAUMGARTNER: Are things better today than when we were growing up as little kids?

PRESTAGE: Oh yeah, things happen so fast now. I mean the internet, that just changed everything, information happens so fast. So it is definitely better. Technology has made it better for me. I think we all long for those traditional values and a slower time but I think it is gone.

BAUMGARTNER: It is amazing and who knows what it is going to be like twenty years from now.

PRESTAGE: I am telling you. I do not know how much better it can get. Information moves so fast and cycles which used to take years and now the public opinion can turn on you on a dime. It is just different nowadays.

BAUMGARTNER: We are in a pretty good spot out here. You read the headlines about what is going on in New York and Washington and who the hell wants to be there?

PRESTAGE: This is a great place and I am happy that I stumbled upon Fort Bend County; really happy that I stumbled upon Fort Bend County. I mean we got to the Fort Bend County Road and you could go this way or that way and we went this.

BAUMGARTNER: It is amazing something will happen and it will go a certain way and it affects your whole life.

PRESTAGE: I did not expect to be here 28 years but it is a great job. I have nowhere to go, I am having fun, I got a list of projects I am working on, great county, great place to be, and the county has emerged, so it is a good deal. I will be here as long as they keep electing me.

COMMUNITY CHANGES

BAUMGARTNER: How has Missouri City changed since you arrived? What are churches like today compared to back then?

PRESTAGE: The same. The church on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America.

BAUMGARTNER: Is church as important now as it was then?

PRESTAGE: I think so. You have some mega churches in the county, not very many, but for my experience the mega churches in my world were all just inside Harris County, just in Houston.

BAUMGARTNER: They are almost like a different phenomenon.

PRESTAGE: When you have communities where people are mobile and they have their faith, they are going to flock to certain congregations and make those churches wealthy enough to do things and get involved in nice new sanctuaries and that kind of stuff.

BAUMGARTNER: How have the demographics changed in the community?

PRESTAGE: It is definitely more diverse than when I came here, it is more diverse. The Asian population has grown so much more. It was nonexistent but certain communities became enclaves for South Asians and Pakistanis. That is how housing patterns work. Neighborhoods that started off as pre mixed black and white became black neighborhoods and now they have become black and brown neighborhoods.

BAUMGARTNER: Black and brown...

PRESTAGE: Black and Hispanic. What you have is a pretty diverse set of communities; pretty much one fourth Asian, one fourth African American and one fourth Hispanic and one fourth Anglo.

BAUMGARTNER: You read frequently that Fort Bend County is the most diverse county in the United States.

PRESTAGE: It is, if you go to the mall. In the mall you see every creature that God made and it is a beautiful thing and it could be pretty advantageous but it takes some work. People have to talk to one another. I hate the mall. You go to the mall and walk around and see how many people are going to talk to you or say "How are you doing".

BAUMGARTNER: Maybe it's getting like New York City.

PRESTAGE: I personally go into HEB Grocery and everybody I see I say something to them; just to break the ice. So it is good, it is easier for children because they are at school together and they are participating in activities together.

BAUMGARTNER: I just went to a concert at my grandson's school, who is nine, and they had a little program at his school out near Fulshear and it was unbelievable to me the diversity in his class. I guess it was maybe twenty kids and there might have been five or six whites, some Hispanics, lots of Asians and African Americans, and that is just the way it is for them.

PRESTAGE: They do not see anything wrong, they have friends, they talk and the adults are the ones that are a little slow to come to the game. Unless someone is in your world you don't know what is taking place.

BAUMGARTNER: I did not realize that it was so extensive.

PRESTAGE: Thank goodness the younger generation is together.

BAUMGARTNER: That is the way they will grow up.

PRESTAGE: They will grow up without any adult screwing it up and I think they will be OK. I think that is a good thing. Fort Bend County has a great reputation and a lot of people take pride in living here and I say I live in Fort Bend County and it is like a badge of honor and I hope it stays that way. Like I said I think it is going to be a great community for a long time.

BAUMGARTNER: Thank you. This will be archived on the Fort Bend County Historical Commission website. I learned a lot.

PRESTAGE: I enjoyed the talk and am honored to be part of this. You made me remember some things that I have forgotten.

BAUMGARTNER: It's been a pleasure.

End of Interview