

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **John Elbert Pirtle**

Interview Date: 09/24/2007

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill & Bruce Kelly

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: The Teacherage, 110 Venice, Sugar Land, Texas

34 Pages



This oral history is copyrighted 2018, by the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. All Rights Reserved. For information contact: Fort Bend County Historical Commission, Attn: Chairman-Oral History Committee, 301 Jackson St., Richmond, TX, 77469.

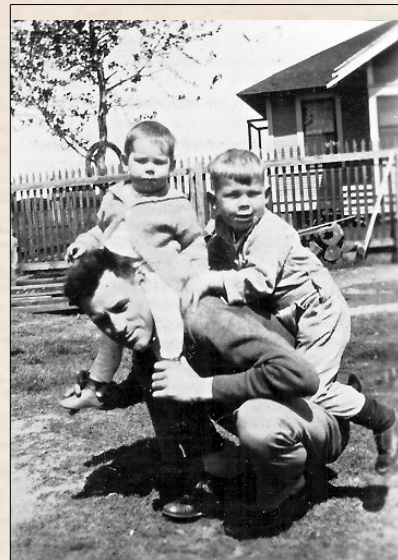
Terms and Conditions

These oral histories do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the County Historical Commission or Fort Bend County. This file may not be modified or changed in any way without the express written permission of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission.

This file may not be redistributed for profit.

Please do not 'hot link' to this file.

Please do not repost this file.



*John Elbert Pirtle, top,
with older brother Jess
Reynolds Pirtle, Jr. and
dad, Jess Reynolds Pirtle,
Sr., squatting.*

Transcript

GOODSILL: John, would you tell us your full name and your date of birth?

PIRTLE: My name is John Elbert Pirtle. I was born March 8, 1931 in Laura Eldridge Hospital, Sugar Land, Texas.

GOODSILL: How did your family get to Sugar Land?

PIRTLE: My parents met in El Campo—they were both teachers, and fell in love and married in Houston. My mother lived with her parents in Alief. They married in 1923 and taught a year in Alief and came to Sugar Land in either 1924 or 1925. The first job my dad had was the timekeeper on the Char House. He went to work for I. G. Wirtz, who handled most of the public utilities for the Sugarland Industries, which is the parent company of Imperial Sugar Company.

My mother's name was Martha White Abernathy Pirtle. White was her middle name. She was named after some hero from the Spanish-American War, I think. My father was named Jess Reynolds Pirtle. My brother's name was Jess Reynolds Pirtle, Junior. My father was born in Indian Territory of the Territory of Oklahoma in 1899. His father was a doctor who earned his degree from the Fort Worth Medical School. I still have that huge diploma. He apparently traveled and didn't stay anywhere very long. I think he must have been part Indian. He and my brother look a lot alike.

GOODSILL: High cheekbones?

PIRTLE: Yeah, and his nose and his hair. He never admitted to any Indian.

GOODSILL: Is that as far back as you can go in your genealogy, to your grandfather?

PIRTLE: No, his mother's name was Sara Jane Lemmons. I'm pretty sure the Pirtles came through Arkansas. My mother's side of the family goes back to Albermarle County in Virginia.

There are stories about two cousins who traveled to Pulaski County, Tennessee. They left Virginia in a wagon train and stopped at some sort of brush arbor camp meeting. With them was this gigantic woman, who was part of the family. She caught a robber crawling into the wagon ahead of her. She yanked him out and beat the hell out of him (laughing). Another story about her was that she killed a bear one day and when they got home, she was cooking the bear! Whether that's true, I don't know, but it's family lore.

GOODSILL: Sara Jane Lemmons gave birth to your grandfather. What was his name?

PIRTLE: Polk H. Pirtle. He was named after President Polk. He and his little brother would stand on something and declare, "My name is George M. Dallas by God, and my brother's name is Polk H. Pirtle." Dallas was President Polk's vice president. Polk was the guy who really pushed expansionism.

GOODSILL: Do you know the name of Sara Jane's husband's?

PIRTLE: I think that was John Pirtle.

GOODSILL: So John and Sara were the parents of Polk Pirtle and he was Jess' father?

PIRTLE: And Jess and Martha had Jess and John. Then Ann and I had John Mark, Stephen Elliott and James Reynolds. Reynolds is the name that keeps popping up. My sister, Betty, had one son, named Benton Reynolds.

GOODSILL: Where is your sister in the birth order?

PIRTLE: She's second. Her name is Martha Elizabeth but Betty was what we called her.

GOODSILL: So, we heard that work brought Jess and Martha to Sugar Land.

PIRTLE: Yes, I remember he worked for I. G. Wirtz, and he was in charge of surveying roads. He had a crew of men. I think the first big thing that he did was build that bridge called the I. G. Wirtz Bridge. I remember them building it in late '30s or early '40s.

KELLY: That's the bridge in Old Sugar Land Street at Main Street. Was I. G. Wirtz an engineer?

PIRTLE: Yes, I think from A & M. He had a son named Junior Wirtz.

KELLY: Did Wirtz supervise the dredging of Oyster Creek and Alkire Lake & Cleveland Lake?

PIRTLE: That came later and my father did that.

GOODSILL: Tell us how your dad worked his way up from being timekeeper. Did he have engineering training?

PIRTLE: He had probably three years at North Texas State University. He was good at math and probably learned surveying. I don't know that he ever had his license but he did an awful lot of surveying work. There were two other engineers: Jack Aymonds and Reggie Wearman. Both were graduate engineer who worked for Wirtz..

Dad was so dedicated to this area. He was a very personable, sweet man in a quiet sort of way. Everybody knew Jess Pirtle. Mr. Wirtz died fairly young. Reggie Wearman died at about 40. He literally smoked himself to death. Dad was the only one left and he held that job until he retired.

He retired at 65. He died in 1980 at 81 years old. They lived at 107 Guenther and he was sitting in his chair, plotting a hurricane, when he had a massive coronary. He was gone like that (finger snap) which was a marvelous thing. We were in Germany at the time and had to come back.

GOODSILL: Do you think he was satisfied with his career?

PIRTLE: Oh, yes, but I think the greatest disappointment in his life was when Mr. Wirtz died and they gave the job of County Commissioner to Junior Wirtz (I. G. Wirtz, Jr.) who was the veterinarian here in town.

The job of Fort Bend County Commissioner paid \$400 a month. That was a lot of money! The agreement was, as far as my father understood, that Junior would have it the first time and Dad would do the work. Then Dad would run for election and get the job. Well, the powers-that-be were not going for it. I read in a book, about the history of Fort Bend County; the total vote was 129 votes and he got 3. It broke his heart.

GOODSILL: That would be devastating!

PIRTLE: Well, it was a company town, you know. They didn't want him to do that job. They wanted him to stay here and work.

GOODSILL: Was his title 'Engineer'?

PIRTLE: I really don't know. Much of what they did back then was pretty elemental. Like dredging. You get a pump, throw a line in and suck out the sand. He used to take negatives and make blueprint pictures.

KELLY: It was my understanding that he designed the Belknap/Brookside subdivision.

PIRTLE: Yeah. He laid that out. I think he laid out Venetian Estates, too. Mrs. Kempner named all the streets with Italian names, Bel Mar, Venice, Solerno. When he laid out Venetian Estates, he took the best lot for himself. He got a big pie-shaped lot that has huge lakefront on two sides.

GOODSILL: Did your parents ever live there?

PIRTLE: No. My sister and her husband built a home when they came back from New Orleans. Eventually they sold it because they were getting older and he didn't want to keep up the large yard. They bought a house in Sugar Lakes where the yards were smaller.

KELLY: He had a LOT of responsibility, because he was in charge of floodwaters and drainage.

PIRTLE: Yes. Drainage was another big job of his. If you go out on Guenther Street and look at our house, it's about 4 inches higher than anybody else's! He put all this dirt in. (chuckles) So the water runs on everybody else, over on the Matlage house and Harmon house (laughing).

He was assured he wasn't going to get any water in HIS house! (laughing) The first house I bought, he went to approve of it, and he said, "Well, you're on the HIGH end of this street so you're safe."

KELLY: What other ways did he serve the community of Sugar Land?

PIRTLE: He was a trustee on the School Board for a lot of years and on the Board of Equalization, which is essentially setting the valuation of property for tax purposes. He and Jimmy Hall, a good friend of mine, used to fight over the value of the properties. He was for keeping it high and Jimmy was trying to keep it low.

He was the Chairman of the Board of Stewards at the Sugar Land Methodist Church for a couple of years.

My funny story about Dad: we had a preacher named Reverend Easterley. He was sort of a little, dumpy man who could drone on and on each Sunday morning. The church was on Fourth and Main. It was a hot August Sunday morning and he and Mother were sitting on the Main Street side. It was a strange-shaped church. It was square but three-sided with an altar in one corner.

They were sitting there and Mother could see that dad was dozing off. So she reached over and squeezed his leg to wake him up. He said (in a loud voice), "WHAT THE HELL! WHAT THE HELL!" (everybody laughs) I was in the choir. Oh, man. Mother was SO humiliated.

When I went into military service one of the first things I bought at the post exchange was a movie camera for my father. He took lots of movies. One movie shows people coming out of the Methodist church including Syb Fowler. She walked all the way down, then turned around and walked back up to somebody's husband, grabs and hugs him. (laughing) Of course it was just as innocent as it could be, but it looked SO funny on film! (all laugh)

KELLY: I remember your father when I was a little boy. It seems to me he was partial to bow ties. Is that correct?

PIRTLE: He was. All his life he wore bow ties.

KELLY: Kind of his signature?

PIRTLE: That's right, it was. They're coming back now! I noticed in the New York Times, the new fashion statement is a bow tie (laughing).

KELLY: We were across the street neighbors. Your father was always well dressed, in nice clothes. All the men wore suits. But he always looked very snazzy to me.

PIRTLE: Right. My memories of Sugar Land are that of a child. I was born here in '31 and I essentially left the last day of 1954 for the service. I never really came back except to see my parents. I was never a part of the community after that.

KELLY: That's kind of good in a way, because your memories aren't clouded by later events. That's one of the reasons we wanted to talk to you. You have memories of what Sugar Land was like as a company town. Will you describe your mother and tell us about your early memories?

PIRTLE: My mother came to Texas from Pulaski, Tennessee, when she was six months old. The story goes that her half-sister was holding her in her arms when she fell off the train and Jack Olive caught her! Jack Olive was somebody from Alief; people around here know the Olives.

Anyway, they moved to Turkey Island, which is down around Spindletop. She remembers a Creole cook. She'd go out and catch craw fish and the Creole cook would cook them for her. That was one of her early, early memories. She would remember them dragging alligators out of the canals and that sort of thing.

They were rice farming at the time but decided that cotton was better, so they bought a farm in Alief. There were lots of kids and she was the baby. She grew up in Alief. You know, all these roads, like Synott Road. People call it Sy-nott, some just changed it to spell like Senate, but it was really Synott. There were the Leasemans and Cook and the Kirkwoods. There was a woman named Lloyd who lived in Alief. I remember seeing her go around with a pistol on her.

KELLY: Do you know how the farming community of Alief got its name?

PIRTLE: It was named after somebody's daughter, I think. The Alief post office was a two-story house on the corner of Kirkwood and Cook Road. The postmaster was a man named Hastings and he lived on the second floor. That was really the center of town. There wasn't much else except some kind of store.

KELLY: I suppose the Hastings High School was named after him?

PIRTLE: Yes. Arlene Hastings, his daughter, was my mother's best friend. They were very close all their lives.

GOODSILL: What kind of personality did your mother have? I've heard more than one person in Sugar Land describe her as very funny and very witty.

PIRTLE: She was. She had a great way with words and expressions. Many of the expressions I've forgotten, and then they pop out every once in a while.

KELLY: I remember when she was teaching school in Sugar Land. There was a teacher that wouldn't decorate her room until RIGHT before the day that classes started to ensure that nobody would steal any of her ideas. It was kind of a joke. Your mother commented, "If she was going to lay an egg, she was going to cackle." (Pirtle laughs loudly). Dot Hightower told us that story.

PIRTLE: I'd never heard that before. (still laughing). But yeah, that's the kind of thing she'd say.

KELLY: I had her for 2nd grade and everybody loved her. Children just loved her.

PIRTLE: Well, she always did exciting things. I mean, she didn't teach by nowadays standards. They'd fire her in a minute because she just sort of taught all over the lot. Kids sort of moved at their own rate. She felt that the point of the primary grades was to let children seek their own rate. They'll get there by 3rd grade. But it takes some of the kids that long and some a lot longer. You just sort of let 'em go along, you know?

I remember one kid couldn't read. She put him up in a tree with a book and he learned to read. (all laugh)

KELLY: New teaching method there! They should do that today!

PIRTLE: She taught a Sugar Land School on Lakeview. She also taught at the Mexican school in 'The Quarters', which was on Ulrich Street. It was a big, awful looking, old two-story building on the left side.

GOODSILL: How did she get that job?

PIRTLE: She started teaching for Mrs. Schumann who had her own school district out there because they owned so much land. So instead of paying taxes, they ran their own school. She and Mitt Webb needed another person to come with her to teach. They talked mother into coming and that was mother's first job. It was during the war. I remember going to Sartartia.

KELLY: Do you know where in Sartartia it was? Was it on the south side of Hwy 90 by the plantation house?

PIRTLE: It was on the south side of Hwy 90 but I don't remember anything being around it. Do you remember where the Betrants' house was on the right-hand side? I think it was just a little past the Schumann house, on the south side. Mrs. Schumann and her mother, Mrs. McLaughlin, were killed on that railroad track. Their house was on one side and every day they would go over the railroad track. One day, guess they didn't hear the train, and bam!

Back to Sartartia. One time mother was sick so she sent me out there to teach school for her (disbelief in his voice) so she wouldn't lose a day! You could do things like that, back then.

GOODSILL: How old were you?

PIRTLE: I must have around 13-14. It was the first grade. Well, I could handle that! They were all in awe of me! I taught the game, Still Water, which is something Eva Beth Keyes taught me in the third grade. It is the way to get the kids to shut up, you know. The kids are all milling around, talking and the teacher screams 'STILL WATER' and everybody freezes. (more laughter). I also told them stories and all kinds of things.

KELLY: Did your mother speak Spanish when she taught out there?

PIRTLE: No. She could communicate just fine. The point really was for them to learn English. She was teaching them in English. One of the funny stories was about a little girl who had a bathroom problem. One day there was water running down the aisle and this little kid named Losaro says, "Hmm, water, plenty of water." (laughter)

KELLY: Tell us about Mitt Webb. Did you know her?

PIRTLE: I did. In fact, one of my last memories of her is in 1970. She had a pear tree in her back yard, called a Le Conte Pear. They made wonderful preserves. She wanted me to come out there and pick those pears. So I did, mainly to please her and mother. The next day I came down with hepatitis and spent six weeks at home. (laughing)

I didn't get it there. I got it in Mexico. But anyway, I remembered that I started getting sick picking those pears. She had two children, Jane and Byron. Jane, I think, became an author. She was an English major and I know she was a writer. Whether she ever succeeded in it, I don't know. The other one was Byron. He flew a P-38 in World War II and crashed. He may have been shot down, nobody knows what happened.

GOODSILL: Will you tell us your experiences growing up and why your road was called on 'Rat Row'?

PIRTLE: Because of the rats! We used to have a chicken coop, great BIG, as big as this room and tall, like a huge cage, that we kept chickens in. When we went to the show in Richmond and Rosenberg, we got home at night. We had a little Wirehaired Terrier, named Corky. Everybody of any age would know Corky Pirtle because he was the terror of downtown.

He used to go to work with my dad. When we'd get back at night he would be there, waiting at the cage, and he'd have all these rats cornered. He'd go and kill all these rats (laughing). That was his job! I also had a horse on 'Rat Row'.

The name of the street was Imperial Boulevard. We lived at 804 in the third house. The first house on the south side was the Biltons, then the Trouts. Before the Trouts were the Boyers but they moved up to 2nd Street. Then there were the Pirtles, the Scarboroughs, the Askews, the Tallases and then the name my kids liked the best, the Topolaneks. One of my good friends was Sonny Topolanek. I'd tell Sonny stories and they'd fall out. Then the Bartoshes, and the last one was the Pierces, Rudy Pierce.

On the other side were the Hills at the end. Arthur Hill was a HUGE man. Then the Robert Bowens. Joe Bowen was my age, Bobby Bowen was Betty's age. Those were the kids. Their mother was a Scarborough. She was the oldest Scarborough child. Then the next house, I think were the Seebers, but I'm not sure. It was a German name. Lillian was the daughter. She was about Ren's age, about six years older. I think she may have graduated with him. I can't say the name. And of course, the Kellys lived there pretty much in the middle. I think there were two Hill families that lived there and Jimmy Miller and Johnny Miller. Then the last one was the Selmers.

KELLY: How far did the road go? Where did it end?

PIRTLE: It went out to what is now Highway 6, which was a dirt road running north and south. It went out to Highway 90. And there were lakes. We called them the State Lakes. There were lakes on both sides and they were full of reeds, particularly the one on the east side. I guess, maybe in the '50s, they brought nutria in. They cleaned those things out and all those lakes were just bare after that.

KELLY: I don't know if you know where Smithville Road is on Highway 6. There were some prison farm homes, guard homes, along there. That might have been the extension of Imperial Boulevard out that way. Did it go kind of all the way?

PIRTLE: Yeah, it did. There was a cattle guard and then the road kind of went like this (gestures) and then there was another cattle guard and that began the State property.

KELLY: Can you describe the dairy to us? Where it was and the activity?

PIRTLE: The dairy was just north of the roundhouse of the Sugar Land Railroad. When we were little we would take a Crustene (shortening) can and go over the tracks to the dairy and Mr. Scarborough would give us a gallon of milk, which was essentially five quarts.

KELLY: Is this the Mr. Scarborough who lived on Imperial Boulevard?

EDITOR'S NOTE: Crustene was a trademark and brand of South Texas Cotton Oil Company and later the Hunt Foods and Industries, Inc. The product was "vegetable oils for salads and cooking, and vegetable oil for shortening." The Crustene shortening can featured a yellow and blue lidded container with metal handles on opposite sides. It was used as a utility can after it was emptied and cleaned.



PIRTLE: Lived next door, yes, he lived on Imperial Boulevard. He ran the dairy. Jack, I can't think of the guy's name now, worked there, too. We would go over daily or pretty often because we had refrigeration.

KELLY: Did you ever see them herd the cattle back and forth across Dairy Bridge?

PIRTLE: I don't think they herded them. The cows were just trained. You just go call 'em and they'd come. They'd walk across the bridge to be milked. Cows want to be milked as much as you want to milk 'em, you know! (laughter)

KELLY: Was there a creamery next to it?

PIRTLE: Yes, we called it the Creamery. They had a label, Imperial Butter. It was a dark blue thing with a gold Imperial crown on it. Imperial Butter.

KELLY: That was sold in the Sugar Land Mercantile and at the dairy?

PIRTLE: Yes.

KELLY: You mentioned the roundhouse. Was there actually a way to turn the trains around?

PIRTLE: There was. It was a turn-around, a turntable which they used to turn the engines around.

KELLY: Were you fascinated with the trains? Living there so close, or were they a nuisance to you.

PIRTLE: I never really thought much about them. Some of the kids would jump on them and ride 'em as they were going out real slow, but I never did that. I do remember that was the first junkyard that I remember. Back behind your parents' house, there were all these old 1918 and 1915 cars over there. You had all varieties.

We used to go over there and just STEER and pretend we were driving. Back in the Depression there were a lot of indigent, hungry people. There was sort of a hobo jungle right there behind Imperial Boulevard.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A hobo is a migrant worker or homeless vagrant, especially one who is impoverished. The term originated in the Western—probably Northwestern—United States around 1890. Unlike a "tramp", who works only when forced to, and a "bum", who does not work at all, a "hobo" is a traveling worker. *--courtesy Wikipedia*

KELLY: Did that worry your parents?

PIRTLE: No, Mother used to feed all of them. People used to say "Your house is marked." They'd write on the highway signs, on the back of them, you know, addresses of people who were friendly. I was never afraid of them.

I'd go over there and they'd be living in the cars. The ones they weren't living in, we'd play around and steer and whatever, you know. They weren't really living, they were camping. I mean, they were transients. I don't think anybody stayed very long because you'd eat up what the town would provide and then you'd move on.

GOODSILL: Hop on the train and go.

PIRTLE: Right! The train was right there. You just jump on the next one. Basically, it just went from Sugar Land to Galveston and back.

KELLY: While we're talking about that, someone told me that you could catch the train behind the Mercantile, and take it to Galveston, as a passenger. Do you recall that?

PIRTLE: I don't remember that.

KELLY: Was the baseball park at the end of Imperial Boulevard when you were growing up?

PIRTLE: Right. It was called The Mexican Baseball Park. It was for the Hispanics.

GOODSILL: Did you ever go watch a game?

PIRTLE: Yeah. I remember big celebrations, Diez y Seis and Cinco de Mayo were the BIG deals. The next day there would be crepe paper everywhere and Mexican flags were everywhere. I was also so proud because I could get a Mexican flag. I really don't remember a lot.

There used to be a lot of goldenrod that would grow out in the field. It sort of fell into disuse, or maybe they'd cut it for certain periods of time. We used to make grass houses by stacking the goldenrod. Then you'd take hay and build up around the stacks and get inside.

KELLY: Were there businesses on the corner of Imperial Boulevard and Ulrich?

PIRTLE: There was a lumberyard on both sides of the street. Old man Blair and Vern Blair, were the carpenters and they had a shop where they built and repaired things. I remember going there one time to 'steal' singles from open bundles. I never thought of it as stealing. One time old man Blair came out and saw us. Everybody else ran and I thought, "I'll just explain to him that I'm just going to take one of these." Well, he just ate me out! (KELLY laughing) I was about six, you know! (laughing) I never did that again and I never liked him any more either! (laughing)

KELLY: So you literally had to drive or walk through the lumberyard to get to your house.

PIRTLE: Exactly. I have a funny story about the Biltons. They were talking one time, and she wanted him to go to Galveston. Everybody else was going down to Galveston and they weren't going to go and she wanted him to go. She kept pestering him, and he says, "Woman, I'm not going down there. There's sharks in them waters and it might get one of us, and it might be me." (laughter) She's the one who told Aunt Clara, "You know that Hitler", she says. "You know, I don't think he's gonna win. He's got too many 'ahrns in the fahr'." (dialect for irons in the fire) (all laugh)

GOODSILL: Good assessment!

PIRTLE: And he did! She was right! When he went in to Russia that was the end of it.

KELLY: Going back to the businesses, was the chemical plant, Visco, there?

PIRTLE: Yes, that was there all my life. A man who worked in the sugar refinery came up with this chemical, this compound, which became Visco Products. It was packaged in 55 gallon drums and sold to oil companies. It apparently broke down oil, I really don't know what it did. I know it stank! The other thing, across Hwy 90 was what they called Stink Creek, which was where they dumped all the char water.

KELLY: Also called Char Lake, I think. But Stink Creek was the nickname.

PIRTLE: Stink Creek's what we called it and it was odoriferous. Richmond and Rosenberg teased Sugar Land about Stink Creek.

KELLY: The cotton gin was close by as well.

PIRTLE: Right, the gin was there. There were also houses on Hwy 90A.

KELLY: That would be where White's Café was before it was built.

PIRTLE: Right. There were about four or five houses. I remember the Bejessees lived on the south side of 90. There was another house pretty close to where Esther Vavrecka lived. They had very exotic chickens.

KELLY: I think when they expanded the highway in the late '40s, they moved those houses onto the left side (east side) of Brooks Street. Some of those houses came from there.

I have housing records and they show they were moved.

PIRTLE: I remember the Harry McBride family. They were IN it when they moved it! (laughing) Lock, stock and barrel as they say! (laughter)

GOODSILL: What makes a chicken exotic?

PIRTLE: They had Ancona chickens with topknots. They were the first people that had game chickens, called Indian Game Chickens. They were pretty chickens, real thin and brightly colored. It's just one of those memories you have as a child. We always had Leghorns and Barred Rocks, nothing very fancy.

A lot of people had chickens. My dad had a brooder of chickens during the war, and sold them for about fifty cents a pound, which was a lot of money! Chicken was a delicacy back then. It was not cheap like it is now. It was more expensive than beef. Milk was fifty cents a gallon. I remember that. During the depths of the Depression, she bought the biggest ham in the meat market for \$2.50.

GOODSILL: During the Depression, was your family was struggling?

PIRTLE: I was unaware of it. Everybody in town had a job! It was essentially one of the saving graces of the company town. They really took care of their people. Sure, you worked hard, my father worked all his life. He left for work at 7 o'clock in the morning and got home about 6 o'clock in the evening. I did that professionally, but I had to commute! (laughing) It took me two hours of commuting a day.

KELLY: There are accounts that the Kempner family put personal money into the company to keep it going during the Depression. So that people wouldn't lose their jobs.

PIRTLE: I'm sure they did. Another reason, they were holding on to their land. The sugar company essentially subsidized the 15,000-20,000 acre enterprise they had. They sold land to the Frosts which became the Frost Ranch. My Dad had to survey that huge piece of property. It is now called Riverstone.

KELLY: I want to get back a little bit to the buildings of the old town, because there is big interest in that right now. What do you recall? You're heading toward the refinery from your house on Imperial Boulevard. You come to Ulrich Street. There was a boarding house called Prikryl Hotel. Tell us what you know.

PIRTLE: Walter Prikryl lived there and I've forgotten who else. We used to sell honey and once I hit the beehive with a hoe and my face swelled up. I remember Mrs. Prikryl laughing and buying a bar of honey in a honeycomb all wrapped up. Single men and women lived at the Prikryl Hotel. The building was an odd angle from the street and was maybe two or three stories. It was a long building with a veranda all the way across the front.

KELLY: Take us on a walk. Let's say you're living on Imperial Boulevard and you're ten years old, and you wanted to walk to the Mercantile. How would you get there?

PIRTLE: You'd go down to Ulrich and then you would cut across an open field (before the clinic was there). The path that went diagonally from Ulrich up to the main drag. The first building on the left was the Prikryl Hotel, as you came to Ulrich. You'd just diagonally cut across to Mr. Norvick's house then to the cleaning shop and the meat market. After the meat market, there was a little square or whatever, and back in there was White's Café and Mr. Rutland's barbershop on the easternmost end toward the Char house. And a bakery, was part of the café.

I'd take the newspapers over to White's because they opened up at 5 o'clock in the morning. I'd roll my papers and get a piece of pie, and a cup of coffee. When I'd go throw the papers on my bicycle, I started on The Hill, then go down Brooks Street, and then finish off on Imperial Boulevard. I guess an hour and a half. A lot of times it was so cold. I was thirteen-fourteen when the Battle of the Bulge occurred. We were all scared to death because it really looked like they were going to take Europe back.

I remember listening to Martin Agronsky on the radio while rolling papers at our house. My dad was helping me that day and it was very, very cold here, but not like it was in Europe where they were having sub-zero weather.

Anyway, my funny story is, I'd ride down Lakeview past all these little brick houses throwing papers up onto the porches. There a lady named Mrs. Worthington, whose husband was overseas, and she was living there by herself. Quite often she would be dressing and she'd have her shades up! Well, of course, every morning I wanted to make sure I didn't miss Mrs. Worthington! (all laugh)

She had a fire hydrant right in front of her house, and one morning I hit that fire hydrant. Papers went flying everywhere and I busted my knee something horrible. I was sitting out there in agony, and she comes out in her negligee and she says, "Oh, are you all right?" I'm just grabbing my papers, "I'm fine, I'm fine" (laughter throughout this story) and ran! I was terrified!!

GOODSILL: You'd gotten busted! Little peeping Tom!! (more laughter)

KELLY: Any interesting stories about collecting money?

PIRTLE: Yes, some of them were hard. I remember Willie Worthington would never pay and I'd have to cut him off every three months until he'd finally pay me. I made about \$25 or \$30 a month throwing those papers.

KELLY: That was a lot of money.

PIRTLE: It was! I think I put it in the bank until I got 16, and then I spent it all (laughs). When I was 16, I went to work for the sugar company. I got my first job working the late shift in the packing department. I think we went 'til 2 o'clock in the morning. They were working ten-hour days because sugar was very much in demand in 1947. It was after the war, and we were making sugar as fast as we could on very antiquated equipment. I packed powdered sugar in one pound boxes. You'd pack for an hour and then take it back to the warehouse. You had to make the boxes and put 24 of them in a cardboard box. It was all hand labor.

GOODSILL: Powdered sugar is very fly-away.

PIRTLE: Well, powdered sugar was dumped into a bin; 100 pound sacks of powdered sugar. There was a box maker and powdered sugar would be run into the box. Then there would be a sealer. You worked the line. People alternated because you'd go nuts if you spent ten hours on the line.

GOODSILL: Was there a liner inside the box?

PIRTLE: That was the brown sugar, which had a waxed paper liner. The powdered sugar was newer equipment and it worked pretty well. But that was the first job that I had for a month. Jimmy Miller was the guy who ran around keeping everybody in line. Well, when I was 16, I was made foreman of the brown sugar machine. There were three women and myself. One was a very young black woman, and one was a very old woman who had the blackest hair in the world and only three fingers, and the other one I think was Hispanic. I believe that's right. Your goal was to get 250 cases of sugar over your shift. Nobody ever did but that was the goal.

The waxed paper that lined the box paper would shove down in the box and the heat of the thing would seal the waxed paper. Then it would float along and was loaded by somebody who put it down into these bins. There was somebody who weighed it to make sure that each one was the proper weight. That brown sugar machine was forever breaking. Your grandfather, Mr. Charles Kelly, was a mechanic on this thing and he was constantly coming over to fix it. One day, I saw him drizzle a little something on the equipment and it worked! And I said, "What did you do?" He said, "Oh, nothing." Well, I looked and he'd put Varsol on those belts. It made it work (snaps his fingers) just like that! So I just got myself a little can of Varsol (laughing) and man, we put out brown sugar like you wouldn't believe! I mean, we never stopped. In fact, we got so good that the last hour and a half we'd just shut down and go to sleep on the boxes (laughing). Somebody always had to wake us up before Jimmy Miller came by! (all laugh).

KELLY: That was a good story!

GOODSILL: What is Varsol made of?

PIRTLE: It's a petroleum product. Humble Oil had that brand name. It was like kerosene or something.

GOODSILL: Kerosene mixed in with your brown sugar! (laughter)

PIRTLE: Never hurt anybody! If they stepped on a nail the remedy was to pour kerosene on it and it worked! Everybody was afraid of lockjaw. I remember stepping on a nail and Mrs. Topolanek pouring kerosene all over it.

KELLY: Which doctor did you go to in Sugar Land?

PIRTLE: Dr. Slaughter.

KELLY: There a little jailhouse in Sugar Land, behind the café?

PIRTLE: I believe that's true. My aunt lived in Richmond. She was my mother's half-sister. She married Wyatt Collins who was the sheriff of Fort Bend County in the '20s during Prohibition. I have pictures of the old county jail with my mother and Ruby sitting on it.

KELLY: You never had any dealings with the jail?

PIRTLE: No. The guy who was the guru was Bill Stinnett. He was hired because he could add columns of numbers three and four figures down, he could go like this and he'd have the right answer. He was hired as an accountant or bookkeeper. They hired him when he got out of prison when they found out his talent. He had this huge Packard, the biggest car in town. His girlfriend was Vlasta Malchick who worked in the dry goods department. Every Sunday they would drive down Imperial Boulevard at about three miles an hour. (laughs) Everybody would watch. He lived in an apartment on the north end of the lumberyard at the corner of Ulrich and Imperial.

Ken Hall's father, Curtis, worked for Bill Stinnett. Then when Stinnett died, Curtis took over that job, which was essentially the labor runner. Keep everybody in line. Now how Bill did it, I don't know.

KELLY: Having come out of prison, he probably had experience in handling people.

PIRTLE: (laughing) I guess so! I don't know!

KELLY: What do you remember about the depot?

PIRTLE: I remember the wagons; They had these big flatbed wagons with huge wheels that were a lot taller than me. I remember the platform had a very rough concrete surface. Across the street was the cleaning shop and they had a very smooth concrete surface. When you learned to skate on the smooth side, then you could go over and skate on the rough side, because the platform was real long and you could skate way down and back.

KELLY: Was there a station master and a lobby?

PIRTLE: Yes, there was. There was a waiting lobby with a wood stove. I don't know that they ever used it.

PIRTLE: Yes, there was. There was a waiting lobby with a wood stove. I don't know that they ever used it.

KELLY: Describe The Dinky.

PIRTLE: The Dinky was a diesel engine and was one of the first I'd ever seen. Everything else was oil, although they did use coal, too. The Dinky usually had two cars behind it. It went from Houston to Victoria in the morning and in the afternoon. You could ride anywhere you wanted to go along that line. I would say a dollar and a half to get to downtown. It would come in to the Southern Pacific station in Houston on Washington Avenue.

KELLY: What route did the train take to get from Sugar Land to Houston? It went through Stafford and Missouri City. How did it get into downtown? Someone told me it turned north and went up almost to Washington Avenue.

PIRTLE: It's that major route where the light company owns in Houston. This huge transmission line now goes through there. As you drive into Houston, Braeswood, Beechnut, Bellaire and Bissonnet goes over it. All these roads go over the main railroad line.

KELLY: I think you had to go all the way up to where Hwy 290 is now, to Hempstead Highway, and cut back down Washington Avenue. You couldn't get from Sugar Land to Houston in a straight shot.

PIRTLE: No. Although I do know that this line is the oldest one in Texas. But I thought it was from Harrisburg to Stafford's Point.

KELLY: Mr. Briscoe had it extended to Richmond. This was back a long, long time ago. The owners of the Sugar Land Plantation had the train tracks curved into Sugar Land by giving Mr. Briscoe twenty-five hundred acres.

PIRTLE: That's why it curves. I didn't know that.

KELLY: Do you remember the Sealy Mattress Company?

PIRTLE: Yes, it was at the corner of Sugar Land Street and Main Street on the north side of the creek. Then it was converted to a canning plant; Marshall Canning. McFadden was the manager of the canning plant. They used to can spinach. I remember women with these huge trays picking off the worms, dead leaves or whatever.

KELLY: Did you see them outdoors?

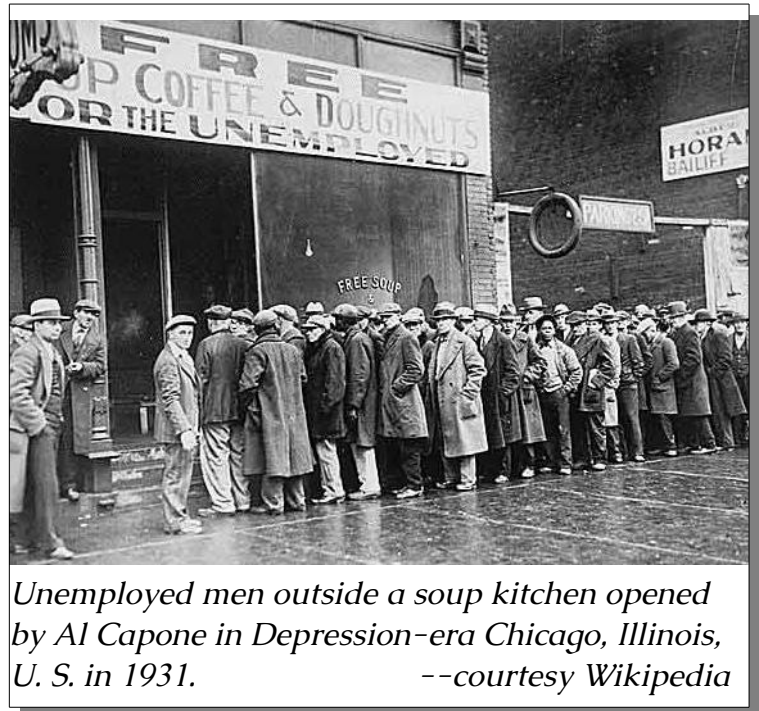
PIRTLE: It was covered but it was outdoors. It was cooler that way. Of course, the canning part was inside. I remember them washing the spinach and the green beans before being canned.

Old man Eldridge, planted all those palm trees because he was going to have dates. Well, of course, it never worked! He also had figs here at one time. Friendswood was a big fig farm. And we had figs here as well. I don't remember much about that.

I remember them raising celery in flats, or these things where you cover the celery to make it turn white. Back then, eating green celery was not right. It had to be white. This was a huge truck farm at an early period. They raised strawberries where all the Lakeview houses are, that whole thing was strawberries fields.

KELLY: And you remember that?

PIRTLE: No. But I remember my mother saying that when they lived on Main Street, they made strawberry wine during the Depression or Prohibition. Charleton was the one that made the wine! (laughter) I remember she said they were all drinking this wine over at Charleton's house (not in my mother's house!). Anyway Ren was over there, he was a little bitty boy. They had been giving him this wine, and he'd kick his foot up in the air and say, 'hoosh push' for 'whoopee'. (laughter) She grabbed her baby up and went home in a huff! (laughing)



Unemployed men outside a soup kitchen opened by Al Capone in Depression-era Chicago, Illinois, U. S. in 1931. --courtesy Wikipedia

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Great Depression was the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world, beginning in the United States, lasting from 1929 to 1939. It began after the stock market crash of October 1929, which sent Wall Street into a panic and wiped out millions of investors. *--courtesy Wikipedia*

GOODSILL: Do you remember any stories about Prohibition with your uncle?

PIRTLE: Apparently there was a gambling place on the other side of Stafford or Missouri City. Right on the border, actually in Fort Bend County. There was gambling and alcohol.

My aunt never alluded to it, never talked about it, and she was part of the Richmond genteel. She had a house right on Hwy 90 that he built about 1913-14. It's gone now but it was across from where Autumn Hills is now. She was very good friends with all the people in Richmond. Of course, Richmond was just about as small as Sugar Land just older (laughs). The Piersons were there and the George's who gave the park. She was very good friends with Mrs. George, the Moore's and the August Meyer family.



Prohibition enforcers dump bootleg (illegal) liquor to prevent it's sale. The law was widely ignored. The popular satirist Will Rogers commented, "Prohibition is better than no liquor at all. Courtesy Wikipedia

EDITOR'S NOTE: Prohibition of Alcohol during the Great Depression. The 18th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution – known as the Prohibition Amendment – was adopted in the 1920s and made the making, selling, possessing, and consuming of alcoholic drinks illegal. Franklin D. Roosevelt ran for president that year on a platform calling for Prohibition's repeal, and easily won victory over the incumbent President Herbert Hoover. *--courtesy Wikipedia*

Ruby, the oldest daughter, married Jimmy Meyers and they struck oil in the Booth area, so they had a lot of money during the Depression. They built a house that still stands in Booth, right across the street from Agnes Booth's place. I remember my cousin was married and they had the reception out there. They had a curved staircase.

Years ago, they had the Sugar Land Reunion at the Community Center. I think Myra Shepherd was still alive. She was the oldest graduate of Sugar Land at that point. I went to that reunion and wrote a poem about all that. I thought I'd read it.

REUNION

In the quiet cacophony of the gathered.

The old refrain began again.

Look at me! I mattered then.

I still do.

Checking out the judgment of time

On body and mind,

Where am I,

In relation to you?

Like splicing old film with video,

We dispense with forty years.

And take up the patterns

Of class, prurience and pecking order.

Old animosities remain,

Old love affairs seem tame.

And we are left, unresolved,

Still flailing away at the wreckage of childhood.

—John Pirtle

KELLY: You're a poet!

PIRTLE: (chuckles) Yeah, I write a lot of them. Anyway, that was my feeling, coming away from that reunion. And I've been back to several others including our 50th year in 1999.

Where Brooks Street meets Hwy 6, all the south side was one huge alfalfa field in the 50s and early 60s. There was a dehydrator was a long cylinder, very much like the old sugar dryers. It was a long tube and they blasted fire through this thing. They shredded the alfalfa and shot it through this heated tube, which dried it out. It would come out and it would be bagged for cattle feed.

Dad retired in '65 so I'd say it was '59-'60, right in that period. Willie Draemer was the foreman who made that thing work. I never knew whether it was successful or not.

GOODSILL: We've interviewed someone else who said that his brother-in-law worked out at the dehydrator and he said it was an awesome thing and it worked very well.

KELLY: It sat on the south side where Brooks Street dead-ends into Highway 6. You have movie film of that?

PIRTLE: I'm sure we do. I don't know where it is. When I was a little boy, I lived on Imperial Boulevard which was the road that went out to the prison farm. Every day there was what they called 'trustees' who were prisoners who were allowed out of the prison because they didn't think they would try to escape. They wore white uniforms that designated them to be trusted, white pants, white shirt, white hats. They would come into town in a wagon, not a buggy but a wagon to collect the mail and whatever supplies the prison bought from Sugar Land. They'd come in just about every day.

There were a lot of lakes out between us and the prison farm that was created from the dirt they dug out to build Highway 90. We fished in those lakes, which were about four or five feet deep, and a lot of times you could just wade across 'em. One Sunday afternoon there were four of us fishing out there. It was kind of windy, unluckily. They weren't biting so we decided that we would go and get in our sort of a fort that we built in this shed. It was off from the red gin where they stored cotton during the cotton season. The thing was piled high with bales of hay. Back then bales were these cubicles. They weren't round like they are now. You could build those up, and hollow them out to make a little room in there—a little private clubhouse, whatever you want to call it.

Well, we got in there and we were going to smoke! So (laughing) we were smoking and sure enough, the hay caught on fire. We tried to put it out but it got away from us. So we vacated quickly and were standing there. I had this little wire-haired terrier named Corky, who had been waiting outside because there was a skunk underneath the fort and he wanted to kill that skunk!

Well, of course, when the fire came, the skunk ran out and the dog grabbed the skunk and broke its neck. Of course, poor dog! The rest of us too, because we were pretty close. (laughing) So we all smelled like skunk!

Further down the hay barn, was one of the trustees who'd been in town to pick up the papers and the mail or whatever they picked up on Sunday. His girlfriend had come out to meet him, I guess, from Houston and they were also holed up in the hay. They come running out, scantily clad, and trying to put on what they could, in a hurry.

There was also a convict who was trying to escape and a team working across the lake with a horse and a mule with a guard on the horse. Well, he was planning an escape and was hiding in the hay! So he ran out and jumped in the lake and started swimming.

This all happened at the same time and the fire became like a conflagration. Well, we beat it. We jumped on our bicycles or whatever and headed to town. We never told anybody that we had anything to do with that. At my age, I hope it doesn't come back to haunt me! (laughing)

KELLY: There was the old acid plant that became the salvage building that faced 90 on the east side of Main Street. It was yellow, kind of a stucco building. Do you recall that building at all? They tore it down in the '70s. It's where the Lions' Club hall was.

PIRTLE: Oh! Where the Masons met? Yeah. On the second floor was my father's office. That was the utility building; I didn't realize they called it the acid plant.

KELLY: Originally it was an acid plant, a paper mill. I have an old picture of it and it reads, 'acid plant'.

PIRTLE: I didn't know that. All I remember it was where the electric and plumbing people worked out of there. Then the engineering, I guess. That was on the second floor.

KELLY: When there was a sugar mill still operating, they would take the left-over fiber, after squeezing the cane, and they would use it to make paper. Bagasse, they call it. At one time there was a Sugar Land newspaper office in called The Texas News. Mr. Webb was the printer.

PIRTLE: Webb Printing! I think you're right. I remember Dad talking about Webb Printing, a lot.

KELLY: Mr. Eldridge established a paper called The Texas Commerce News and Mr. Webb published it. So tell us about your Dad's office.

PIRTLE: It was in that building, on the second floor. Eileen Blair, who married Willard Petrosky, was his secretary. I'm trying to think of other people. I've already mentioned that I. G. Wirtz and Reggie Wareman were engineers or worked in that department. Mr. Enquist's group worked downstairs. I remember my dad had a blueprint machine. They would put something they wanted to copy on blueprint paper and then stick it out in the sun. Exposure to the sun to made the printing emerge.

KELLY: The chemical reaction?

PIRTLE: Right, the chemical reaction. I remember going up there on Sunday afternoons, and he'd let me make blueprints of leaves.

KELLY: Wasn't there a freight elevator?

PIRTLE: There was a freight elevator, but they used the stairs. There was a stairway outside and I can remember my dad flying down those stairs. He was a very agile man. I remember that, but not much else about that building.

Then the next one down was the implement building. That's where Mr. Watson sold John Deere farm equipment. It was that building that had a rounded Quonset hut top.

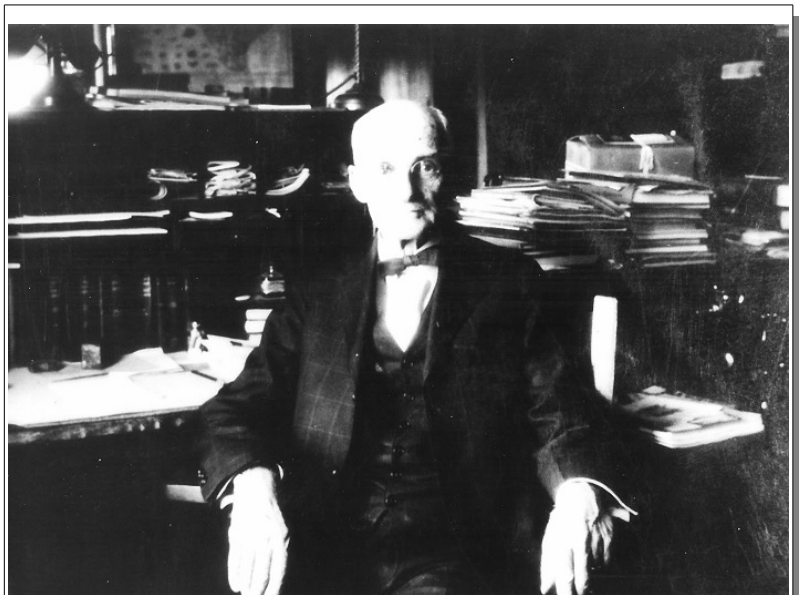
KELLY: Did your dad ever work for M. R. Wood? Wasn't he an engineer?

PIRTLE: My son in Fort Worth has M. R. Wood's old oak desk.

KELLY: I have a picture of M. R. Wood, sitting at that desk. Did you ever meet Mr. Wood?

PIRTLE: Yeah, I remember him. I thought he was a stuffed shirt when I was little. He lived right there on the corner of 2nd Street and Wood Street behind the school. How apropos, huh.

(laughs)



M. R. Wood at his office desk in the mid 1920's.

KELLY: The history we know about Mr. Wood is that he was a Renaissance Man! He knew a lot of different things. Very smart.

KELLY: What is your earliest memory of going to school in Sugar Land?

PIRTLE: Well, I remember not being able to go because I was too young. I remember Baby Selmer, had on his white outfit and his white shoes, and he was going to school. From Imperial they had to walk through town up to First Street or Front Street then to the school. They all went to school together. I remember being very upset that everybody was going but me! I remember first grade and Miss Johnson. That was a very happy year for me. I remember I figured out the word 'doorstep'. It was the biggest word. She'd cut out words and the bigger the word, the harder it was. I figured that one out and I got to paste it in my book. (laughing).

KELLY: Your first grade was in the first building? Describe that little classroom to us.

PIRTLE: Well, to me, it wasn't so small! There were windows on both sides. The boys and a girls bathrooms were outside and you had to go out a door on either side of the front. There was a boy's cloakroom and a girl's cloakroom. I remember there was a hot pepper plant that grew outside. We didn't have a water fountain but we had a hydrant. You could turn the hydrant on after recess and get a drink of water.

Somebody dared me to eat one of these hot peppers growing by the hydrant. I ate one one of those peppers and it set me on fire! I was screaming and Kenneth Scarborough hadn't eaten all of his lunch and he had mayonnaise sandwich and so they gave me that mayonnaise sandwich to take away the hot and it worked! (laughter). Kenneth Scarborough became a big football player for Baylor. Not Hall, but Scarborough.

And then I got to Miss O'Neil's room, she was the principal of the school. She taught 2nd grade and she and I didn't like each other one bit. (laughs) She wrote on my report card (and I still have it), 'shows off'. (laughter all around)

Eva Beth Keyes was the third grade teacher and taught me a lot about art and music. I remember her exposing us to art! Nell Edith LaBatte was the fourth grade teacher. She came from north Texas and had a degree in music. She taught us an appreciation of classical music. She'd play music and then you'd have to guess whom the composer was and what it was.

In the fifth grade, Miss Wiley was our teacher. She was sort of large, young, vivacious, and fun. That was the year they integrated all the Hispanics into the school. They did it at just the fifth grade, not below that. We had kids who were four years older than us, great big huge kids. This was during the war and she had 56 kids in that room. I don't see how she did it! I remember, one time she said, "If you children don't shut up, I'm going to scream!" And we laughed, you know. Then all of a sudden she let out a war whoop. That worked for about five minutes!

GOODSILL: She hadn't taught you the silent game!

PIRTLE: (laughing) She didn't know Still Water and I didn't tell her! She was an artist and introduced me to paper *mache* and a lot of stuff like that. I guess her degree was in art.

GOODSILL: How did that integration go? Did the kids get along okay?

PIRTLE: Yeah. I learned all about sex from the older kids! Whoop.

KELLY: Do you recall any of the children's names that integrated with you?

PIRTLE: Ignacio was one. Blas Rodriguez was the first one who came in the fourth grade.

KELLY: Roland Rodriguez? Was he in your grade?

PIRTLE: No, he was younger, but he was Blas's brother, I guess. I remember teaching Blas some German words (chuckles). He just thought it was wonderful that I knew some German words. (laughter) Ignacio was my good friend and my protector. He was older and he kept the others from beating up on me, or whatever. He was my buddy. At sixteen they left school. Ignacio was working down in Texas City and was on the dock when the *Grandcamp* blew up. He was killed there.

EDITOR'S NOTE: April 16, 1947 – Fertilizer explosion kills 581 in Texas

A giant explosion occurred during the loading of fertilizer (ammonium nitrate) onto the freighter *SS Grandcamp* at a pier in Texas City, Texas. Nearly 600 people lost their lives and thousands were injured when the ship was literally blown to bits.

(<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/fertilizer-explosion-kills-581-in-texas>)

KELLY: What was his last name?

PIRTLE: Maybe it was Rodriguez, but I'm not sure. But he was good to me.

KELLY: So who did you have in sixth grade?

PIRTLE: We had Miss Dix who was crippled. She had had infantile paralysis. One leg was shorter, and she limped. She was a beautiful girl with a huge chip on her shoulder. For some reason she took a dislike to my sister, who was at that time a junior or a senior in high school.

Then we got Mrs. Booth. We'd all had good musical training before she got there. We had this songbook and she would have us sing. She'd say, "My grandfather's clock was sitting on the shelf" (sung in a very odd voice). We'd just holler! (laughter)

KELLY: When did you enter high school?

PIRTLE: Seventh grade was when you got promoted into the next tier. Oh, I take it back. The middle school was still seventh and eighth in the same building. They kind of went back and forth.

You wouldn't remember the New Look! But the New Look was started by Edith Head in 1948 and Kuhn, I've forgotten what her real name was, she married Buddy.

KELLY: Oh, Frances Jean Kuhn Tice.

PIRTLE: Right. She had one of those New Look skirts, which was about six inches from the floor and women had been wearing their skirts above the knee, and then all of a sudden they dropped like that. I remember she was wearing that skirt, and everybody was checking her out! (laughter)

KELLY: Did the other girls soon follow suit?

PIRTLE: Oh, yeah. It wasn't long. This was after the war. I was a junior in '48, a sophomore in '47 and that's when I broke my leg, playing football. I was in the Laura Eldridge Hospital for six weeks because back then they didn't know if I was still growing. Fortunately I had reached my height, because the doctor said it would not grow, and it hasn't. I was out of school for half a year.

PIRTLE: I was clipped in a football game in Bellville. I laid out a year and then played football my senior year.

KELLY: Did the war affect your education at all, do you think?

PIRTLE: I don't think so. In the early years you had to be single to teach and we still had a lot of single teachers. When I got into the sixth grade, there wasn't anybody left. I guess that's why mother got to teach.

KELLY: The male teachers and female teachers both had to be single?

PIRTLE: No, the males could be married, but the women had to live in the Teacherage or they had to live in some supervised area.

KELLY: But when the men had to go off to war, so you lost the male teachers.

PIRTLE: Right. Mr. Daniels taught me multiplication tables.

KELLY: Tell us a little bit about the high school.

PIRTLE: The first semi-circle that was built had the auditorium in the center. My father used to show silent movies in that auditorium, Hoot Gibson things on Saturday night. He was the projectionist showing those kind of Bob Steele and Ken Maynard cowboy shows. Where these names came from, I have no idea. Buck Jones, all these pre-Roy Rogers that made it all so sweet. But the others were real Westerns.

GOODSILL: Was it mainly kids that attended? Adults?

PIRTLE: Everybody would go. I really don't remember silent films. But I know he showed them.

KELLY: Did you ever hear stories about dances being on the roof of the auditorium?

PIRTLE: No. The only story I remember is somebody put a car up on top of the auditorium.

GOODSILL: That would have been hard to do! Tell us that story!

PIRTLE: I think it was Skeet Guenther's class that did it as a Halloween prank.

KELLY: I think my father was in his class.

PIRTLE: I think they took it up there piece by piece! I just have this vague memory about Mr. Bardon laughing and sort of passing it off, like "We knew they were going to."

The high school had a really nice gym with a swimming pool! I guess it's still there. It looks like it. The building's still there.

KELLY: The building's there but; they filled the pool in with cement.

PIRTLE: They did? It had the most gorgeous tile you've ever seen in it. Particularly around the edge, it was small, postage-stamp style, size tile. I Loved it. I almost drowned in that pool once.. There was a kid named Kenwin Nelson, who moved to town, and his dad was some hot-shot. I must've been in the fourth grade. He was older but was swimming with us. He held me underwater and I was (makes blubbing, drowning noises). The coach came over, pulled me out, and blessed him out. (laughing) He was about to drown me!

KELLY: I've heard stories from my father, and I don't know if they did this when you were in school, but in gym class, when the boys would swim, they would skinny-dip.

PIRTLE: Oh, yeah, it was always naked. That was the custom.

KELLY: Even if you went swimming in a swimming hole?

PIRTLE: Not if you went mixed swimming. I used to go down to the sediment pond, Cook's Dam, and swim without any clothes on. Most of the time your parents didn't know you were doing that anyway. You didn't want any wet suit! (laughing)

KELLY: My dad said that they would make you wear a rubber bathing cap and that's all you wore.

PIRTLE: That's it. That's right. Keep the water clean!

KELLY: But the girls did wear a suit, my mother said. They wore wool suits. She said they were just awful. Very itchy and uncomfortable and they didn't fit, very saggy.

PIRTLE: Your mother remembers that?

KELLY: Tell us about your football team.

PIRTLE: It was terrible. We weren't any good (laughing all throughout).

KELLY: So, nothing to report?

PIRTLE: No. Kenneth Hall came along, right behind us so everyone immediately forgot we ever existed. We were sort of like that team in Larry McMurtry's story Last Picture Show. In the town of Archer City there was a team that couldn't win anything!

EDITOR'S NOTE: See Kenneth Hall's interview on the FBC Historical Commission Web Site at <http://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=40325>

KELLY: The student body was very small. Did most boys go out for sports?

PIRTLE: It was almost mandatory. The only one that I remember in our class who didn't was Harry McBride. I was so tall and fast with huge powerful legs. I didn't want to play football. I'm one of those weird people. I didn't want to, but I did. I broke my leg first, and in my senior year got a brain concussion and lost a tooth!

I didn't play basketball. That was not a requirement. I didn't have that kind of coordination. I was pretty good at tennis. Ann and I used to play against the varsity team at Baylor. We weren't on the varsity but, we were good enough to play them.

PIRTLE: Oh, I brought some pictures that you all might want to see. This is James Miere, Patsy Tice and me in front of the auditorium. We were fixing to go to Galveston, that's why we don't have any clothes on.

PIRTLE: This is Mrs. Keyes' third grade.

GOODSILL: Look at how beautiful the school looks.

PIRTLE: I remember a girl who came to our school from Hawaii. She brought a coconut for recess and slammed it up against those columns to break the coconut (laughing).

KELLY: Here's Jean McCord and Sally Kelly. This is some pageant we had and this is Miss Wiley, the woman who said 'I'm gonna scream'.



John Pirtle (striped shirt) with classmates in Home Economics.

PIRTLE: And this was the big snow we had, an ice storm, around 1951. It was terrible. In Houston people were without lights for 2-3 months.

PIRTLE: When we were seniors we made enchiladas. We had our own party and everybody brought Mexican food. Catalina brought a big thing of enchiladas.

KELLY: I have not seen the interior of the Home Economics building. This photo is good.

PIRTLE: I think this is Betty Sue, Harry, Marilyn and me on our bicycles. That's the bicycle that I delivered all the papers with. Look at those handlebars! Ever seen handlebars as big as that? Look like Longhorns!

This is on Brooks Street. I lived in the second house. The Thompsons lived in the first one still standing and the next one was ours. We moved from there to Guenther Street. My Dad built that house on Guenther in 1950. From '47 to '50 we lived on Brooks Street. Ted Harmon lived next door.



From left to right, Betty Sue, Harry, Marilyn, and John getting ready to ride bicycles. John's bike had large handlebars that helped him carry newspapers on his delivery route.

The Miers lived there before we did. They built out on Alkire Lake. One of my funny stories about my Dad was he despised moving. That's why we lived on rat row for all those years. He would not move. Finally this house came open and Mother was going to have it!

So she and the maid went over to receive the furniture as we were bringing stuff over. The first thing that Dad brought out was this camp stove that somebody had given us. It didn't even work! It was raining and he picked it up, looked at the house, and said, "Give this to your Mother, and if she says anything, HIT her with it!" (laughing)

PIRTLE: This is me on Okinawa. I was in the Korean War. Except, fortunately, I never saw any combat.

This is our senior prom. I'm in the middle dancing with Marjorie Haverland. The dance took place in the acid plant, upstairs in the rec hall. They had big old Heart Tournaments. Dad played, it was sort of a guy thing.

PIRTLE: This is the day Betty went off to college and it's in front of the char house and that funky little fountain that's still there.



John's sister, Betty Pirtle McClure, at the Char House, circa late 1940s

KELLY: There are no fish in it anymore, but the same plant life is still in it.

PIRTLE: This one was taken August 1945, at Playland Park on Main Street in Houston the night Japan surrendered. Here's a second one, same night. We tried to get in to downtown. We gathered in that square in front of the café. Ted Harmon brought his gun and fired it a couple of times. Mildred, Helen, Taz, and I wanted to celebrate, so we were going to drive into Houston! We got as far as Little Pal Record Shop, which was about Holman Street. We never made it downtown. We finally just gave up. We turned around and went out to Playland Park and did our celebrating.

GOODSILL: According to my notes you were in 8th grade at this point.

PIRTLE: Sounds about right. This is Corky. That's the little dog that terrorized the town. He was the one that Dubbo Jenkin's wife, in front of the drug store, was showing off her baby in his big baby carriage. Corky got in a fight with another dog right under the baby carriage and my mother was just humiliated!

PIRTLE: I wrote a poem and read it at mom's memorial.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Continue to the next page to read the poem John wrote for his beloved mother's memorial service.)

KELLY: I loved your mother. She was my favorite teacher. One of my classmates won Teacher of the Year for Fort Bend and went on to compete in Texas. In her speech she said that your mother was her inspiration to become a teacher, and that she used your mother's methods. We just thought the world of her. We were one of her last classes. When we graduated from high school she had a party for us at her house.

PIRTLE: I'll be darned. I'm so happy to hear that

Interview ends

IN MEMORY OF MARTHA WHITE PIRTLE

How does one say good-bye to a vacant house?

Where once the breath of all we were, issued from its frame.

How imperceptibly it wafts away

As we erode the events of life into unsubstantiated memories.

To look back, to look down on that face,

Open mouth, flickering eyes.

And see the little girl there, darting through the scraps of a diminished life

And vainly trying to connect them.

Replaces awe and respect

With guilt and pity,

And a protective numbness.

Death hides her kindness and scares us into her realm

Before she kisses us, and shows us the brilliant light of our existence,

Shining, outside of time.

In the beginning was the Word,

The Word was God.

The word is with God.

—Her son, John Pirtle

March 26, 1994