

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Larry Spillers**

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Comments: Part of a series on the history of the building at 307 Fort Street, Richmond, Texas, currently the Fort Bend County Office of Emergency Management.

11 Pages



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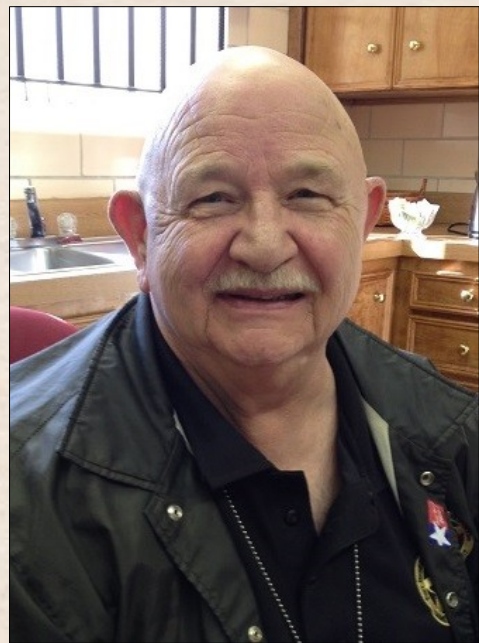
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Transcript

ELLWARE: Let's start out with you giving me your full name including your middle name and your date of birth.

SPILLERS: My name is Larry Lynn Spillers, Sr. and my date of birth is February 13th, 1947.

ELLWARE: Almost a valentine's baby.

SPILLERS: Uh huh, close.

ELLWARE: You took us on a tour of the former jail here, and I want to go back and find out your interaction here. I want to know when you started. In my notes it says 1972.

SPILLERS: Thereabouts, yes

ELLWARE: How did you learn about the job?

SPILLERS: I think it was Harvey Cramer. He was a lieutenant with the Rosenberg Police Department and they had an opening come up here, and dispatch part time and so I come up and talked to 'em. Tiny didn't know me at the time but Sheriff Herman Hurta knew me. Right away he said "We'll use you".

ELLWARE: So how did he know you?

SPILLERS: I knew him through his son and his daughters because later on, when I was working at Richmond PD I got one of his daughters on working there.

ELLWARE: What was her name?

SPILLERS: Sarah Hurta.

ELLWARE: Tell me about your first job here?

SPILLERS: Scary. Look I had a monitor at home that I would listen to and it was an old, old box thing that back then they had just bulbs in it, and it was forever going out and I couldn't hear 'em but another friend of mine was dispatching and I would sit there all night and hand write out every call that went out. That's how I practiced. Then once I got in here and got over that I was fine.

ELLWARE: So you would shake your head when people would come in that you knew?

SPILLERS: Yes.

ELLWARE: You're talking about when the inmates in the six-person cell started a fire. What year was that?

SPILLERS: I want to say '73 or '74

ELLWARE: 1973 or 1974. Tell me, recall for us for the tape, exactly what happened.

SPILLERS: We notified Homer Sharp at the fire department, he rolled out the engine for the pumper, the two inch, and we all started coming back in, we were in patrol cars and when we pulled up we run in and just followed the hose right up stairs and one of them was standing there handing out batons in case they got rowdy or tried to jump you and get out. But they didn't do that. They just ran for the door probably 'cause the smoke and he opened up with that two hose and they were swimming on their belly coming out of there. It was awesome. We used to get a lot of pecans from those trees at the fire department, nice soft-shelled.

ELLWARE: What happened to those trees?

SPILLERS: I don't even know if they are still there anymore, but my mom, when she was alive, and I was working, I'd pull my little Toyota truck up and fill up 'cause it was windy, and just let it sit there for about three days and then I'd take the pecans and pass it around to different women that my mom knew at church and they could make pies.

ELLWARE: That is the smartest way to pick pecans I've ever heard of in my life. It's brilliant. So you started as a dispatcher. Did you move on up?

SPILLERS: Yes. I went on patrol but I didn't really like it that much. I wanted to get in the forensic part. Roger Boyd, who was a patrol sergeant and a friend of mine, and Harvey Cramer, they all talked to me because I used to work at the funeral home and drove an ambulance a little bit on the side.

I take pictures and the troopers would want a copy and whoever and it help them out. The sheriff said the first thing we got to do is to go to school to get certified. Margie Ferguson and I both had to go because we were not considered real deputies until we were certified. We had to take two hundred and sixty hours to be qualified. You got to take all these tests and pass every one of them. If you missed one you don't get certified. We both got it and she went to communications and decided to go out on patrol and she did that for a while. Then she got married and went to Richmond.

ELLWARE: Where did you go to school to do that?

SPILLERS: University of Houston. The classes in the beginning was U of H to get certified. Then I had to go to Quantico, Virginia, at the FBI Academy for forensics training. I've been up there at least four different time which is an honor. T. O. Bock was one of my trainers. He used to call over at the sheriff's office and said, "This is T. O. Bock. I need to talk to my illegitimate son. They would call me and say Lieutenant, "Do you know a man named T. O. Bock?" I said, "I sure did I'm his illegitimate son." We always called him T. O. Bock because he didn't like his own name – Townsend.

I also trained about everything as far as ID, fingerprints, photographs, bodies, digging 'em up, stuff like that, getting the parts together. The body, the pieces. Sometimes this one ain't gonna fit. This one's a little bit bigger guy [bone] than that one. Yeah, it can get messy. But, then I would take these rookies out with us. I'd say, "You wanna help us?" Every once in a while they might faint on us but we'd get through it.

ELLWARE: When you were in this building working, you worked as a dispatcher. After you did your dispatching, what else did you do in this building?

SPILLERS: In this building after being dispatched, they talked me into coming and getting out of dispatch to go with T. O. Bock.

ELLWARE: I see. He was in this building?

SPILLERS: Everybody knew T. O. Bock. I actually had met him the first time at Rosenberg Police Department. He did sketches and back then it was with foils, you know. They would give you eyes, or the hair design, and caps, and stuff like that.

ELLWARE: What do you call it when they give you the eye design and the hair design and all? You called it foils?

SPILLERS: Foils. Yeah, it's like clear plastic and it's been inked onto it and what you do on a certain age, height, weight it gives you a start there. Then what we would do, they would never look at it, they'd start to explain it to us and we would start putting it together. And only thing we'd let them look at to help us, was the hair style. There was like five pages of that stuff then and they'd go through there and say, "It's this one right here." We'd put it on, turn it around and they'd say, "Yeah, that's old Oscar right there."

ELLWARE: Poor old Oscar had it. Okay, so then you started working with T. O. Bock and he saw your potential and he sent you up to Quantico and some different places for training, but he essentially was a forensics persons to start with in a way, wasn't he?

SPILLERS: Uh hum. He had to leave and he went to Harris County Morgue as an investigator. They needed one. So he left and that made me lieutenant so I liked that. Got a bigger badge, little bit more money, yeah, that was nice. Then out of the blue one day I get this phone call. Hey, this is your illegitimate daddy [T. O. Bock]. I said, "Hey, dad, what's going on? He says, "Hey, I'm looking for a job." I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "Man, I'm tired of that Houston stuff, 'cause you have to work all night" and he was probably over 65. I said "Well, I'm still working for Hurta and Harvey's here. I think we can work on that." So I said, "Let me call you back." So I talked to Hurta, and I talked to Harvey. Everybody said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah". HHurta said, "But you know you'll be back as a sergeant." I said, "I don't care. Make him captain; make him lieutenant, whatever you want." He came back and he stayed with us three more years and then went to Brazoria.

ELLWARE: So about what year was it that T. O. Bock came back?

SPILLERS: That was early in the stages. I want to say about seventy four, between '74 and '75. I forgot what year he passed away. He'd taken his wife to Hermann Hospital downtown. He was sitting there and talking to him when he said, "Oh, phew. It's getting too warm in here" and he walked outside. He took his jacket off and came back and sat down. He said, "That made me feel better," and then he slumped over. They got him into the emergency room and they got him going. They put him in the Twilight Seat and they brought him out of it. A couple of guys from Harris County were there. He opened his eyes and smiled and then it just stopped and they couldn't bring him back. That was the biggest funeral I ever saw down there. It was crowded.

ELLWARE: Where was T. O. Bock's funeral?

SPILLERS: There in Angleton. There were people from Washington, California, Colorado, and Louisiana. I mean these people came from everywhere. He knew any of those people who walked in and said, "How're things going, old so-and-so?" He knew the people and how to get around and how to help me. I owe my life to him because that's what I wanted to do, forensics. I got tired of patrolling, and I'm still in ID now. I'm still a lieutenant.

ELLWARE: So T. O. Bock trained you. Do you like training other people?

SPILLERS: Well, I trained for nine-and-a-half years. But I got burned out because there was nothing new coming out of forensics to me. It's like a robot, the same thing over and over again. But everybody I did train, they come back and say, "You are the best trainer" because I make it easy fun.

ELLWARE: You told me about the prisoner starting a fire upstairs in a cell and having to go in with a fire hose. What other interesting things do you remember that happened in this building? You mentioned that someone dropped a gun.

SPILLERS: Oh, now that was an accident. Steve Eichman was putting on his gun belt. I was on the phone to dispatch and about that time [makes a gunshot sound]. I hit the floor and I'm crawling underneath to get away, "Am I alright?", Steve was saying, "This dang gun!,nd he put it back in the holster.

ELLWARE: First of all, let's go back to Steve Eichman again. You showed me one hole in the wall that's patched over downstairs in the hallway where his bullet went off.

SPILLERS: It was right next to a clock. I tell you what, it woke everybody up. I mean, it was loud.

ELLWARE: Do you remember what year that was? How long had you been on the job when that happened?

SPILLERS: Maybe a year. Maybe a little longer. Several guns have discharged inside that building by accident. That old man I was talking about, Homer Sharp, he had a .45 caliber gun. Most of us carried a .45. I'm getting behind the desk and just a second before he walked back in the door to get his gun, it went off. These rooms were solid concrete and metal and it was ricocheting. Harvey fell over backward on the trash can on top of me and I don't know where those other people went. The bullet went ching, ching, ching, ching and he said, "Man! What the heck is that?" Then all of a sudden clunk. The bullet fell on the floor. Someone asked, "Who shot this?" Somebody said, "He got the magazine out but he didn't realize there was one in the chamber.

SPILLERS: Yeah. if there's one in the chamber and you take off the safety, you will let it go. Then A. B. Eversole, from the Richmond Barber Shop, was in the kitchen and asked one of the guys. It was a .38 revolver and he said it was .357 revolver. The guy said, "Did you see that thing?" When I heard that I just walked on by and went in my office. The next thing I know, six rounds go off. He done killed the dishwasher door. They had to get another door.

ELLWARE: So A. B. Eversole asked to see the officer's gun just to hold it?

SPILLERS: He [Eversole] let Homer sleep back there in his place [barber shop]. He said, "I'm going to keep it up where everybody knows Homer Sharp did this."

ELLWARE: So Homer's the one who did it?

SPILLERS: Homer took the gun and he's looking at it and I'm walking back because I know what's going to happen because if a man's got a gun and it's got anything in it, he's going to shoot it.

ELLWARE: So A. B. Eversole kept that dishwasher door in his barber shop to show what people did? Because Homer slept in the back at the barber shop?

SPILLERS: Yeah, he was sleeping back there. He got too old with the fire department so they gave him a place to stay. He had his own little house back there. He did more with knives. That man could sharpen a knife, and I mean, they could cut surgery with it [makes a swishing back and forth in the air sound]. He was a heck of a guy.

ELLWARE: What happened to the door? Is it still at the barber shop?

SPILLERS: It's still over at the barber shop somewhere. They're closed because it's after eleven. I can get you a picture proper, with the hose on it. I can hold it and we can give it to you afterwards.

ELLWARE: That would be great. It supports the story.

SPILLERS: It's the guaranteed truth. Homer got so mad. From all his drinking, well, it wasn't the drinking, it was the smoking. He'd smoke like a chimney stack. He had emphysema. That's what finally got him. He was a sweet old man.

ELLWARE: What was the year you stopped working in this facility?

SPILLERS: I guess when we moved over there. We started moving things over in '80 and we finally opened in '81. Sometime in there was when that hurricane came through.

ELLWARE: Hurricane Alicia? Hurricane Alicia was in August of 1983.



Dishwasher door from the Fort Bend County Jail showing a bullet hole from a weapon that was accidentally discharged. No one injured in this incident.

SPILLERS: There was one around '80 because we were starting to move and they said stop and the county judge said they were going to put people in there until this was over That was nice. They were able to feed them. A lot of them didn't have anything but they were starting in the kitchen getting things going. The inmates and trustees help them out.

ELLWARE: To feed people in the community or in the jail?

SPILLERS: Most of them came from Louisiana.

ELLWARE: So the people who evacuated and came to this area, the inmates helped cook for them.

SPILLERS: They had a bunch of them already set up to be cooks. You get good quality if you get the right guys. They were coming from TDC [Texas Department of Corrections]. They do pastry. Oh, good gosh, woman! I seen some pies I never seen like that. There was one they made, I think it was strawberry. I ate so much of that. I ate the whole darn thing. Boy! I hurt for two days.

ELLWARE: It was worth it, wasn't it?

SPILLERS: Oh, it was good!

ELLWARE: So you worked in this facility from the time you started in '72 and you did that to try to pay for your college and you went to the University of Houston. What did you study?

SPILLERS: That was to be a certified peace officer. We were talking about the hours, two hundred and sixty some hours. Now the kids that go too be certified, Lord, you're looking at, I'd say, nine hundred or more hours. The office is getting so big. I was a dispatcher even at Rosenberg. They said If you want to get certified, you'd have to go, like Harvey and them, I think it was once a month that you would go somewhere. It was normally at the fire departments that would have an area big enough to teach them to be certified. Most of them that were there were already certified. Some of the newer ones hadn't. You could go for a year before being certified. When I got it certified, it was two hundred and sixty hours. Before that it was a hundred and something. I said, "Man, we got jigged on that one." We got double slapped. At the U of H certification graduation, Harvey and his wife Betty and Sheriff Hurta showed up.

Harvey was now dying. I'd been working all evening and I just went to sleep when I get a phone call. It was his youngest son. I call him Button. That's what we used to call him but his name is Jason Cramer. He said, "Hey, what are you doing?" And I said, "I'm trying to get some sleep. I've been up most of the day." He says, "Well, Jesus, dad was talking to us", and he told them, "Here's what I want to do when I die. Get hold of Spillers first. From his own days off working at the funeral homes."

I've done so much stuff. I said, "What does he want?" He had told Button "You're the one to set up for the funeral and I [Button] don't have to worry with it. He worked it enough that he knows what I want and how to do it." So I got with the funeral home and I said, "I'm here for Harvey Cramer." and the girl said, "Yeah, they said you were going to be coming." We sat down and set everything out. It was AWESOME!

ELLWARE: How long before he passed away did he say that he wanted you to take care of the funeral arrangements?

SPILLERS: It was the next day. He already knew he was dying. Me and him used to go fishing and all kinds of stuff.

ELLWARE: What funeral homes did you work with?

SPILLERS: I worked for the ambulance service. I worked for Mr. Clarewood. Nice gentleman. His daughter worked there. He had me driving the second out ambulance. That's how I learned to help do embalming. I wasn't certified.

ELLWARE: Right, but he let you help?

SPILLERS: I really liked it .It's not that much money. The only ones that make money on these things are the people that own the funeral homes and whoever has the plots.

ELLWARE: Okay, let's get back to this building. When the jail moved out of this building, you moved out with it. You have not worked in this building when it's been the Emergency Management?

SPILLERS: Yes, I have. On that hurricane that we were working.

ELLWARE: In 1980?

SPILLERS; Yes.

ELLWARE: As you were transitioning out, you were still in this building working on that.

SPILLERS: No. I was here about five years ago, too. Didn't we have one come through then?

ELLWARE: We had Hurricane Ike come through.

SPILLERS: That's it, I guess. That wind was quite stiff. That was when I was still smoking then and another fellow was standing out there where the wind wouldn't hit us and I said, "Watch this." I went like this [gestures tossing his cigarette away] and it was GONE! I worked then and the one before. That was a big one. It was right after those antennas fell over in Missouri City. I was working there in night time. I built a home. I said, "I'm tired of renting." She said, "You're right. We got kids. That's okay. We'll go on and get a house."

I was working ten hour shifts as a deputy doing what we always did, fingerprints and everything. Then at night I would go out to the first one they were building and then for the back, which was the disaster wall, they were putting up two towers. We got a lot of money on that.

ELLWARE: So you got part time work guarding those towers?

SPILLERS: UM hmm. When the one that fell, it was a mess. We were getting double pay and we were working twelve hour shifts.

ELLWARE: Didn't the one that fell kill someone?

SPILLERS: They all died except for the man that oversaw the place. He wound up in a mental institute because it was his deal. They had the thing up. All they were doing was installing the upper part antenna. Then they would be through. They were going home for Christmas. We reviewed the tapes over and over and over. You could see two of them unbelt and tightening down on these u-bolts. That's not where the problem was. It was at the top where this thing was put together with ropes and it gave way. We looked at them and that one guy's fingers actually touched. He even got a hold of it. He didn't know it. He was dying because he was going down with the tower. Almost half of that tower is still buried in the ground.

ELLWARE: We are out of time so let's polish this off here. What is your current job title?

SPILLERS: Lieutenant.

ELLWARE: Do you have any old photographs, personally, of inside this building?

SPILLERS: I will look. There's one where we were in the kitchen, I'm in uniform. I had worked that night and the morning. It was my birthday. They got me one of these old cupcakes and they stuck one of these big, white emergency candles on it and lit it up and I'm standing there like this [makes a funny face].

ELLWARE: [laughing] A cupcake with an emergency candle in it. We would greatly appreciate any photographs you have of the interior of the building. That would be very helpful.

SPILLERS: I'm going to try to get you one.

ELLWARE: Very good. We could talk another three hours but we've got someone else waiting so we can't keep going. Thank you very much.

Interview ends