

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Lawrence Newton Elkins**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Bob Gaffney

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Transcript

GOODSILL: Larry, why don't you start with telling me about your career?

ELKINS: Well, I made my career choice late in life compared to some peers. I had just finished high school at Dulles High School, which at that time was the only high school in Fort Bend ISD (Independent School District). I think the district began through a merger in 1959 with the Sugar Land School System and Missouri City School System. I finished Dulles in 1978 when it was still just one high school. I went to college at Sam Houston State University right out of high school.

Initially I wasn't going to go to college. I wanted to learn a trade and get out and make my way in the world. The last two years at Dulles High School I took the Co-Op program, which allows students to learn trades on campus and/or leave campus to practice the trade that you had learned. I'm not so sure if the intent was to pigeonhole or identify children that were college-bound or not. But certainly most of those were in my group, in the Co-Op, in the trade profession, did not go on to college. It had a reverse effect on me. It was a matter of me learning a trade. Mine happened to be air conditioning. I went to school until eleven or eleven-thirty then left to go to work and get school credit to learn a trade. So when I graduated high school I'd be able to earn a living. However, I quickly learned in the summers, because that job is year-round, and after school that the air conditioning trade and construction in general is a very hard, hard, hard life style to work. The people I worked with at the different trades and worked very hard.

I did finish college in 1982. I was about to graduate with a justice degree. I had no idea they even had a degree in criminal justice. My point of reference at that time, growing up in Missouri City, was police officers in Missouri City and Stafford. Sugar Land at that time was considered so far away, believe it or not! It was long distance to call Sugar Land from Missouri City. Sugar Land seemed like forever away from Missouri City and Stafford. The point of reference I had growing up were the police officers in the two cities. To my knowledge none of them had any formal education. It just wasn't required. It was a rural town until about 1970 when the area became less and less farm land and more and more developed.

So I arrived at college. I graduated officially on May 1, 1982, but the last semester is true in college like in high school. I didn't want to be in a classroom any longer than needed, I found out that I could get a semester's worth of credit and on-the-job experience through an internship program, which is what got me here. I felt I needed to sell myself, let people see who I am, in order to enhance my opportunity for employment.

I made an appointment to come to Juvenile Probation in December 1981. At that time they existed in a residential house behind the YMCA here in Richmond, Texas. The house is still standing. I spoke with the then Director or Chief, Steve Monk. I explained my situation to him and asked that I be given an opportunity to do an internship for him. I had also been to high school and college with a classmate who was one grade ahead of me, Kathy Davis. Kathy had already done the same thing. She had previously done an internship with Steve Monk with Juvenile Probation. So, in fact, I was just following her footsteps. Steve put me on as an intern the first working day of January 1982. worked an eight-hour day, forty hours a week, for Juvenile Probation until I graduated May 1, 1982.

It was around March or April that the Juvenile Probation Department was about to move to this facility (307 Fort Street). I would come over here with the chief and others on the way to court, to see how it was coming. They were converting this one-time jail to a new detention center at that point in time. They were still putting the finishing touches on it by painting it, cleaning it up and getting some stuff more in line with what was required by the Juvenile Probation Commission more than the Adult Shelf Standards Commission. So it was going to be a detention center with cells and bars but they had to do some modifications.

I asked Steve Monk, the Director, "Steve, I can see we're fixing to move to this new location. You're going from a Juvenile Probation Department to a Juvenile Probation and Detention Center and you don't have any Detention Officers. Aren't you going to hire some? May I be considered?" Steve said, "I'm going to hire." I believe he hired eight detention staff. Detention Staff in the juvenile world are the same thing as a Jailer in the County Jail or the same thing as a Guard in the prison system. So a Detention Officer was just a Jailer, if you will, to oversee inmates, male and female, aged eleven to seventeen.

GOODSILL: Why did you want that job?

ELKINS: That was my foot in the door. That was the only job that existed. My internship expired at the last of April. I graduated college on Saturday, May 1st. Unbelievably, the county started my employment on May 1st. I said, "I couldn't be two places at once. I couldn't be up there graduating and here working but the payroll started on Saturday. So they started me Saturday. I graduated Saturday, went to church on Sunday, and went to work on Monday. Detention was the only thing available. Kathy Davis was a year ahead of me. She had been out of college for a whole year working for the family businesses in the Fulshear area. She, too, wanted to be a Probation Officer. Later on this department expanded and had opportunities for probation. I was exclusively a Detention Officer.

In my internship, I was learning probation work, court work, and interview techniques and real world job information. I did not do any detention work while I was an intern because the Detention Center opened a day or two after my graduation and I was not eligible for hire until I finished college. I did an internship through the Juvenile Probation Department January 1982 through April 1982. Then I was hired to be a Detention Officer in May 1982 until I left here in March 1983.

GOODSILL: What was it about your internship that made you think you wanted a career in this field?

ELKINS: In the internship I got to understand the practicality of what they were trying to teach us at Huntsville and Sam Houston. There were a lot of ideological philosophies and book learning in that environment and you come out here to the real world. Steve Monk was the best people-person you could imagine. He ran a very good department. What I wanted to do when I got here was get involved. I started learning from my coworkers how to interview people, how to ask the right questions to get the information needed and how to treat people.

But, believe it or not, I was also reflecting back on the construction job sites when I dealt with juvenile's parents or the juveniles themselves. They grew up in a different environment than I grew up in. I grew up in a very good environment. There were certainly good kids here who made some bad choices but there were also some bad kids here during my time here. Every day I came to work I was able to draw back on something in my past. Whether it was some police officers in my past that I knew that were bringing the children here for detention or to have an adult relationship with those ladies and gentlemen or to have an adult relationship with the staff here and the court house. The courthouse was very small back in 1981-1982. I was able to learn from the judge and the district attorney. You understand that I grew up in a place where people in certain positions commanded a little bit more respect; the district attorney, the judge, the teachers, the preachers, the chiefs, police officers. So I absorbed everything on the job versus in the classroom.

GOODSILL: I can see how it appealed to you.

ELKINS: It did appeal to me. Interestingly enough the county had a limited budget or they were not willing to spend a lot of a budget at that point of time in Juvenile Probation. I worked in the county for thirty-three years in other departments. I saw it over and over again over my career, ebbs and flows.

There were four of us out of the eight that were hired at Detention that had college degrees. You had to have a degree to become a Probation Officer. I remember speaking to the director saying, "When is the budget cycle? When will you know? Will you be expanding your department?"

GOODSILL: Because you wanted to be a probation officer?

ELKINS: I wanted to be a probation officer. That's what I went to school for. That is what a well-heeded advisor on campus groomed me for, almost told me this is the career that might work for you. She happened to be right. At that point in time the county had spent a significant amount of money renovating and after all Mr. Monk's staff had doubled when he had to take on staff to supervise inmates for the first time. He mentioned that he did not know but he thought the budget might allow for one probation officer next year and it was going to be a competitive situation. Kathy Davis and I, who grew up together, were in the same, exact boat; same high school, same college, same internship, same employment opportunity.

One day the Director of Adult Probation next door, who we become good friends because Juvenile and Adult Probation shared this building with the idea that the Salley Port was the connecting space between adult probation over here in the single building and juvenile probation that we're sitting at today. So there was a lot of camaraderie. The chief at Adult Probation called me at home on a day off and asked me I wanted to be one of his Adult Probation Officers. I did. I left here in March of 1983 to work at Adult Probation. That gave me a continuation of a relationship with the courts and the district attorney's office but not in the juvenile probation office. The laws of juvenile probation are so much different so I had a new strain of education; the Adult (Probation) career and I was there for thirty-three years.

GOODSILL: Was there any value to having accidentally started with the juvenile probation department and then moving to adult probation department?

ELKINS: Sure, there was a lot of value for someone who's fresh out of school. I was here about fourteen months. It's just I wasn't a paid employee that long. I was here from January 1982 to March 1983. An internship from January to May and then an employee from May to March. For that fourteen months I was learning real world versus academia. They both have their place but the relationships that I started at this facility with the external departments of the county, the clerks and the district attorneys, and the courts.

Dealing with law enforcement came in extremely valuable when I went to adult probation because I was dealing with the same people on a deeper level. I was a probation officer handling several hundred clients at a time next door versus juvenile probation.

GOODSILL: Your caseload was several hundred people at the same time?

ELKINS: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: Tell me how that worked.

ELKINS: When I worked here, I believe the juvenile probation code restricted them to forty cases apiece. In theory, you have a few cases and you gave each case a lot of time. Adult probation was a volume situation. When I started the Adult Probation they gave me a stack of files, a cabinet, (and) an office. At one time I had three hundred cases and I was just like everyone else. So you have to learn "on the fly". You have to figure out what you need to be doing and you have to constructively do your job. You are your own boss with set guidelines by state law and the philosophies of the court order but you're up to your own about how to get that accomplished. (both chuckle) But the relationships that I had here in this building was first the juvenile probation staff were fabulous people, and second, it allowed me to meet the other crowd that I had to work with.

GOODSILL: Why did you like your job?

ELKINS: The Adult Probation job, I guess, suited me better. I can't compare it to the Juvenile Probation Officer. The Adult Probation job worked real well for me. In the beginning of the career, we simply enforced court orders. That's all we did in my estimation. When people in your supervision did well, you assisted in their reward. When they did poorly, you assisted in their incarceration. You were your own show. Later in that career, the rules changed, (i.e.) at lot more state involvement became apparent. When you, take someone else's funds, they have restrictions you have to adhere to get those funds, whether it's in my father's age, whether it's the TEA telling a school district how to run their show, or whether it's the Texas Probation Commission or the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission telling you how to run your show.

From Day 1 in this building I was learning how to effectively deal with people. I was better suited for Adult Probation than Juvenile because I was dealing with the parents of these children and I could converse better with them than I could with the children. It takes a special person to be a Juvenile Probation Officer. I believe I could have done that, I could have done well at it but my niche was dealing with the adult side.

GOODSILL: So you've been doing it for thirty-three years?

ELKINS: I worked from May 1, 1982 to December 31 of last year (2013). I retired January 1st. It was few months short of thirty-three years. When I started here with the department as an intern and perhaps as a paid employee, if I don't remember the exact date that we were starting to accept juveniles at this facility, we had to transport the juveniles to Angleton. We did not have a center until this one opened. Any children that were brought in from the local police departments, sheriff's departments, or the state troopers, they were brought here to this place then we, at Juvenile Probation, transported them to Angleton and put them in the Angleton Detention Center where they were cared for there until this place opened around May 1982 by my recollection. So I took many trips with other probation officers to Angleton in the cars with the kids in the back.

GOODSILL: Learning as you went.

ELKINS: Learning as I went, pathetically so. I was so excited to take in our first few kids and it was as if we hit a dry spell. We didn't have anyone here for quite some time (BOTH LAUGHING). I had an opportunity before this interview to tour the building, which I think is perfectly suited to what its purpose is today. (It's) quite different as I remember it in the sense that the bottom area had, I believe, it was six cells in it and the upstairs area had eight or ten cells.

GOODSILL: Where the Office of Emergency Management is now were cells, where the desks and the computers screens are now?

ELKINS: On the west end of this building was a large, open room. They had a ping-pong table and some stuff where they could let the kids out for an hour or so. Upstairs to the left of the stairs I see Steve Macko's office, the detention center's little office, two individual private cells, solitary cells, and Mr. Javiar Vela's office in the upper east corner. Across from those offices there was just a row of cells.

As I look at this picture from the Herald Coaster (Fort Bend Herald and Texas Coaster), I see a previous sheriff showing off some technology. This system was there where you could grab a handle and pick out which doors you wanted to open, if not all of them to open them all up at one time.

GOODSILL: Turning them over?

ELKINS: Turning them over; turning the wheel.

GOODSILL: And select which lever you wanted to push to open which door?

ELKINS: That's correct.

GOODSILL: High tech technology of the time.

ELKINS: High tech 1950! When we had juveniles in custody, if we had both genders in custody, we'd keep the females downstairs and the males upstairs. If it was just males, we kept them all downstairs. When I was here it was never full. Sadly, today, I'm sure they're busting at the seams with overflow. The world has changed.

I've been told by people such as my sister's age group and older that if you look at society, it changed in the mid to late 1960's because young people aren't following their parental footsteps for the first time. I was pretty young at that time. Looking back, they're probably right. I can tell you, it's society. There's such a different world today than thirty years ago. I don't see hardly the parental involvement. I see a lot of community involvement but I don't see any parental involvement.

GOODSILL: What do you mean community involvement?

ELKINS: When I was a child there just wasn't a whole lot to do in the community. Missouri City was farmland and with the exception of two businesses. It was a residential community. You do not have activities for children. You had a Methodist, a Baptist, a Catholic Church, later on a Church of Christ. You had four churches, one school, two schools later on. Your activities were all at the school with the exception of boy scouts, but there was no cub scouts. There was no girl scouts. There was no soccer. There was no swim.

GOODSILL: So it's all just changed in the community. You'd think things would get better.

ELKINS: You would think. I mean there's more opportunity to occupy a child's time today than there was in my day. However, in my day, perhaps there was more parental involvement. Maybe the family, out of necessity seemed to be a little more cohesive. Now I can be talking as if I'm jaded. I'm not, remarkably not. You understand thirty something years of seeing what has not worked in some people's lives. When I was here, I can only attest 'til I left in 1983, but we had truancy, which is now decriminalized in the last legislature. We had people in here for shoplifting, an occasional drug offense, very occasional, and then we had one particularly violent offender who was in here for a double homicide.

But the population of the county, I'm going to make a guess that there were 200,000 to 250,000 in 1982 or 1983. The population incarcerated was pretty slim. Yes, we had extraordinary numbers in adult probation on our caseload but there weren't but a hand full of us here doing it. There were between 1,500 and 1,800 people on probation in the whole county.

GOODSILL: How many might you say now?

ELKINS: I don't know. You'd have to ask the director now. The last time I was involved in that department was ten or fifteen years ago. I was the seventh probation officer to hit Fort Bend County and they've hired 250 since then. Today that department has about 80 employees, not all probation officers but mostly. Society's changed, more single parent households and that may make a difference, more both parent working career households and that might make a difference, more of an imaginary, perhaps and perhaps not, mental thought process of "mores' better" so you have to work longer so you can have more, which creates less time for what might be the most important thing, which is the upbringing of children. School systems have changed, that's for sure and so has the population.

GOODSILL: Interesting to speculate.

ELKINS: It's speculation. I don't have the answers. I have some thoughts on the process. I know that there always have been and always will be problems and it takes good people to address them. When I worked here under the direction of Steve Monk it was a wonderful, good department and in adult probation as well, even with the volume. We tried to better the person you're charged with overseeing if possible. That's what we did.

GOODSILL: So you feel proud of that.

ELKINS: Oh, yes, I am. I had a lot of time to reflect last year about Juvenile Probation, because this is where I started. It seemed like the last twelve months of my career I was reflecting back. What a career, what an opportunity. Normally you don't get recognition from those that you supervise. You understand that you may have positively changed the lives of the discharges at Juvenile and Adult Probation, but when you come across someone or they see you, they're reminded of not a good time in their life. But I do believe that a lot of conscientious probation officers have positively affected a lot of people.

GOODSILL: That's a good outcome. Is there anything else about your career that you'd like to talk about?

ELKINS: Well, I'm the luckiest person in the world. I've talked about the family that I was able to grow up in. My parents were good people. Their career choice was education. My sister's career choice was education. I didn't know what I wanted to do but I knew it wasn't education.

GOODSILL: However, you kind of became an educator on your own, didn't you?

ELKINS: I did in my own little way. If my parents were here they'd say, "That figures. He had to do it his own way." My parents were educators and extremely good role models. My father moved to Stafford around age six then to Missouri City around age eight. He was a product of the Missouri City school system.

GOODSILL: Tell us your father's full name?

ELKINS: Lawrence Edward Elkins. He graduated from Missouri City High School. I don't know what year it was. He went to Sam Houston State University on a basketball/athletic scholarship. He might have had a little bit of me in him. I don't believe he did that well the first year he was there. He would have said in his defense, "It's difficult to concentrate on your school work when you know you're going to be overseas in a few months." After World War II he came back and he went to college and he did real well. That's a life lesson.

He and my mother instilled upon my sister and me their values. They were remarkable people. The value of working hard, the values of what they learned through wartime. He came back and became a mathematics teacher and a coach at Missouri City High School. He coached and taught all of the people in Stafford and Missouri City from that era. He later went to be the first principal at E. A. Jones Elementary. It was renamed Missouri City Elementary to E. A. Jones in memory of Mr. Jones shortly after the district had merged into Fort Bend ISD in the early 1960's.

GOODSILL: Your father was quite close with Mr. Jones?

ELKINS: Yes, very close. He met my mother in college at Sam Houston State University.

GOODSILL: And your mother's name?

ELKINS: Sue Newton Elkins. That's where my middle names comes from. It's her maiden name. She's remarkable, too. She was able to see the world and experience the world outside of a small east Texas town. She saw the world at college and then came into Houston upon her graduation.

She actually had a business degree and went to work for Humble Oil for a couple of years and then later decided to be a schoolteacher. So they both wound up teaching. They both had masters degrees and made a career of it. My mother stepped out of teaching two times for about six or seven years at a time when she had her two children. So she was a stay-at-home mom.

GOODSILL: You and your sister, lee, were quite a number of years apart.

ELKINS: We are seven years apart.

GOODSILL: So your father continued as principal at E.A. Jones. What was his next position?

ELKINS: He was the coach/teacher at Missouri City High School, then he went to E. A. Jones, as the principal, then he accepted a position within Fort Bend ISD administration. I believe it was called the Director of Curriculum or something like that. It was in administration. Sadly, the first superintendent of Fort Bend ISD, Mr. L. P. Rogers, (Rogers Auditorium on the Dulles campus is named after him) passed away in around 1968. His assistant at that time was Mr. Edward Mercer. (Mercer Stadium is named after him.) The board made Mr. Mercer the superintendent and he made my father the Assistant Superintendent until 1974 when Mr. Mercer retired. My father was asked to be the Superintendent from 1974 until 1984 on his retirement. My mother just kept being a teacher. She actually taught in HISD (Houston Independent School District) for a year or two because she wanted me to have the benefit of kindergarten, which today is not required in Texas but it wasn't offered in Fort Bend ISD. So she took a job teaching in HISD so that she could bring her child into kindergarten. I went to kindergarten in HISD and then E. A. Jones Elementary starting in first grade. My mother probably had twenty years in the retirement system because of her stepping out twice. My father had thirty-five years. My sister retired with twenty-five years, give or take one year.

GOODSILL: And your grandmother Newton?

ELKINS: My grandmother's an extraordinary person.

GOODSILL: What was her first name?

ELKINS: Blanche Willis Newton. She was raised in east Texas. Later in life, after children, she decided to go to college. She went to Sam Houston State University and got a teaching degree. I think it's extraordinary for any person, but especially a lady in economic circumstances such as hers, to get a college degree.

GOODSILL: She was a beloved teacher at Sugar Land.

ELKINS: My grandmother, yes. My grandparents lived in a place called New Willard, Texas, which I can describe as going to Livingston, looking for the densest patch of woods, walking in the woods about 15 miles and you might find it. It was your typical east Texas sawmill town. When the sawmill closed, the town all but folded. My grandparents moved here around mid-fifties. My grandmother came to Sugar Land with that degree in hand. She was hired on as an elementary school teacher at Lakeview Elementary and retired there.

GOODSILL: Sugar Land Elementary, Sugar Land School at the time.

ELKINS: Correct. Today called Lakeview Elementary. Before the merger it was probably Sugar Land Elementary.

I'm proud of who they were. I'm proud of the lessons they taught me. I know that they would be happy with me. My parents passed away in 1989 but they were able to see, and they had examples as well, of people that weren't as fortunate as they were but they were able to see me, their last child, standing on his two feet, able to take care of himself, have direction and they were pleased with that.

GOODSILL: And thriving in his career.

ELKINS: Yes. I was taught that whatever you do in life, it must be honest work, it must provide an income to substantiate whatever lifestyle you think you need to live, and you darn well better like it because you're going to have to do it for an awful long time. I loved what I did. All 33 years of it.

GOODSILL: That feels like a good place to end our interview. Thank you for your time.

Interview ends