

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Mary Helen Whitlow**

Interview Date: 08/18/2012

Interviewer: Melissa Dixon

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

Location: Fort Bend County Museum, Richmond, Texas

7 Pages



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Transcript

DIXON: To start with basic biographical information, where and when were you born?

WHITLOW: I was born in Houston, Texas, in 1924. Mother had a midwife. My father wanted her to go to the hospital, but she wouldn't do it. She was fearful they would get her baby mixed up with (laughter) another baby.

DIXON: I don't blame her. What brought your family to Fort Bend?

WHITLOW: My grandfather and my grandmother moved to Richmond. It may have been in the late 1800s because my mother was born in 1901. All six of their children were born here.

DIXON: Okay and what type of work did your father and grandfather do?

WHITLOW: My father worked for Southwestern Bell, and I'm not sure about my grandfather, he died in 1921.

DIXON: What type of work did your mother or grandmothers do?

WHITLOW: My grandmother never worked. She hardly left the house, but my mother worked for Southwestern Bell as an operator.

DIXON: Out here in Richmond?

WHITLOW: Yes, they used to have the old system here. Then we moved to Rosenberg. She retired from the telephone company with over 25 years of service. I worked for the telephone company, too.

DIXON: When did you work for them?

WHITLOW: I started one summer, when the operators took vacation. I was seventeen, I guess. The phone company used to be in a two-story building on Morton Street.

DIXON: The Davis Bank?

WHITLOW: Yea, that's it! Back in the back of the bank Southwestern Bell leased space for the telephone company. That's where my father went to work. My mother was always working there. My father and mother separated, they weren't married but about ten years, so I didn't grow up around my father at all. Never did see him. We lived with my grandparents.

DIXON: What area of Richmond did you grow up in?

WHITLOW: You know where the old courthouse is? My grandmother's house was on the corner catty-corner from the Methodist Church. The light company wanted to buy that corner, so they moved my grandmother's house, the whole house, a great big house with great big rooms. Of course, that was before I was born, but that's where I grew up. Right there on Jackson Street, yea. We didn't go by names then. I don't think the streets were even named, to tell you the truth. We didn't need it. We knew where everything was. You went over one street...I mean from Highway 90 and that was Morton Street. That's where the drug stores were, and I don't how many grocery stores.

DIXON: A lot of grocery stores?

WHITLOW: Oh yes. Joseph Grocery, Henke's, Smith and Lee Richie and Leavy's Grocery. Most of them were Jewish people you know. There's at least eight. There were two drug stores run by Mr. Mervel and Mr. Muller. They were both on Morton Street.

DIXON: Which families lived near you?

WHITLOW: Grayless' lived in back of the street, in back of my grandmother's house. Miss Henson lived next door, Martha Virginia's grandmother.

DIXON: Where did you and your family shop? Tell me about the set up of the town.

WHITLOW: We bought some things at Edelstein's Department Store. Real nice line of clothes, you know. Mother bought groceries at Red and White Store, run by Mr. Richie on Morton Street? Josephs had the store across the street.

DIXON: What did you and your family do for entertainment.

WHITLOW: (joyful laughter) Most of the time we just entertained each other. Talking and things like that. When I was young, my mother managed to give me a bicycle for Christmas, and I rode and rode it. The Whitten's across the street had a daughter who was my best friend. I knew Virginia, too, and went to school with her brothers. We were real close friends. We liked to listen to the radio because, of course, they didn't have TV back then. We managed to find something to do, we always did. My mother liked to bake when she wasn't working. I used to get in there and get into the cake batter. She used to get aggravated at me. (laughter) She said, "I am just going to mix you up in that dough and eat it." (laughter).

DIXON: Where did you go to Church?

WHITLOW: Saint John's Methodist Church for Sunday school. Then after I started working for the telephone company, I had to work some Sundays. Sometimes, they would have services at night and I would go. I don't think Saint John's has services now at night.

DIXON: So many churches have gone away from that. Tell me about school. Can you remember the name of some of your teachers?

WHITLOW: I went to Richmond High School. Mr. Huette was one of the teachers. Seems like he was the football coach, if I am not mistaken. I went to school with Ada Francis March. She's passed away and her brother, Stanton March, passed away, too. I went to school with Mary Jo Whitten, she lived across the street from us. We all walked to school, we didn't have a bus. The kids at Fulshear and Needville, at that time, did not have a high school, so they bused all those people into the Richmond High School. I went to school with Emily Bardow, too.

DIXON: Was there a band and a football team?

WHITLOW: We had a football team. I played in the band. I remember the band director, Mr. Hogue. I can see him to this day. One day he said, "Oooh those should have been banned long ago." (laughter) Oh, poor man. He had a time with us. I marched in the band at football games, playing the alto sax. (laughter). I wouldn't have had that, but Miss Mamie George let me have it. I played it the whole four years I was in high school. I got credit for that, too.

Math was my weakest subject, and I didn't have a good background. Miss Scott taught school, but she used to read magazines in class. She would have us stand up by her desk and read from the reader. Some of the kids would get stuck on a word. She'd say, "Go on, go on." I know that's the reason I had such a terrible time with math. I didn't have any background, nothing whatsoever.

DIXON: What grade were you in when you actually moved out here?

WHITLOW: That was third grade. I went to Jane Long Elementary. I had an old picture of us taken around Thanksgiving. Some of the kids had on Indian costumes, and my cousin and I had pilgrim costumes.

DIXON: Can you describe a typical day in your childhood?

WHITLOW: Oh, well, mother always believed in breakfast. I'd eat breakfast, and then I would get ready to go to school. Then we walked to school and would come home an hour for lunch. Then we would go back to school, and we would get out about three or four. As I said before, Miss Scott used to read from magazines. I don't think I will ever forget her... never. There wasn't any teaching done...maybe I shouldn't say that, but its true. That stuck in my mind, I can't seem to forget it (laughter).

I really enjoyed growing up in Richmond, that's where all my mother's relatives were. I had a lot of friends in Richmond.

DIXON: Did you have a garden?

WHITLOW: There wasn't any garden. My grandmother did like these hydrangeas. She had them in the front. In freezing weather, she'd go out there and cover them all up. I never see one that I don't think of her. My mother had to go to work to support me. She and my father were separated. She did not do any gardening, never did. She just worked. She came home, did laundry, and took care of me (laughter).

DIXON: Y'all didn't do any canning or that kind of thing?

WHITLOW: No, we sure didn't.

DIXON: Any animals?

WHITLOW: (laughter) We didn't have enough for a cow or anything in the back. I remember this old Mulberry tree. That thing would drop those berries, or Lord, they stained you, your clothes and everything. I think, at one time, my grandmother must have had chickens. That went by the wayside. It used to be a bunch of us then. My grandmother had six children. Her oldest son died when he was 26. The other was married and had two children. Then my grandmother had four daughters in a row.

DIXON: What were all their names?

WHITLOW: Her oldest daughter was Annie Bell, then mother was next, Lovey. Mother said the kids used to tease her about her name. "Oh, Anna Lovey, loveys." (laughter) The next one was Ellene, then Alda. She was premature gray, and when we were growing up, we remember her having gray hair (I had premature gray, too). We used to say she was old but she wasn't. The youngest was my uncle, C. F., named after his father Charles Francis. His sisters never let him grow up. They waited on him hand and foot.

When he married, he expected that from his wife, but she did not do that because she always worked, too. He had two boys, he was the only one who had boys. My grandmother's oldest daughter had two girls. Mother only had me. Alda had three boys. She didn't have any girls. Then C. L., he was 37 when they were born. I was 37 when my daughter was born.

I had one daughter. She's married and lives in Corpus Christi. She went to school here, of course. She got one of the George Scholarships to go to school. She worked from the time she was 17. She got loans from the University of Houston, paid them back, and graduated at 18. She used to work at the restaurants because the tips were so good. I never will forget that at the San Francisco Steak House, they wore these mesh stockings and, girl, they rubbed great big blisters on my daughter's heels. We were poor at that time. Because my husband had left. Anyway, they made them pay for those stockings at \$12!

DIXON: About what years did you work?

WHITLOW: I was seventeen when I went to work here in the early 1940s. I was going to work one summer so I could get some spending money.

DIXON: Just before the war.

WHITLOW: Then they cut over to dialing. Seems like that was in the fifties, and girl, I hated it over there. I'd rather work with this old stuff than over there. It was terrible! Everything was supposed to go by seniority. But if they liked you, you'd get a promotion; otherwise...well, you know what I mean. I had over twenty years service, but I told mother, "I can't stand it over there another minute." So, I resigned, and I've never been sorry either (laughter). Then I went to work for the county.

I didn't make any great salary, but I worked long enough to get a retirement. I went to work in the County Treasurers office for Liz Williams. The Basset House was her family's home. She never did marry.

DIXON: So you didn't have to travel far for work then?

WHITLOW: Oh, no, I could walk, yeah. Mom and I both walked, we didn't have a car (chuckles). As I think back now, we had enough to eat, clothes to wear, and a place to stay as far as that was concerned. We lived on such a little bit of money.

I married in forty-six. We were married about three years when we bought this house in Winston Terrace. That's where I had my daughter.

DIXON: Did they have anything special for the Fourth of July or something like that in Richmond?

WHITLOW: I don't think so. In the fall, Richmond would have this kind of a cakewalk. Mother baked a cake. It wasn't a cake mix then. She donated it to them, and they sold it and got quite a bit for it. That didn't last long. It really didn't.

DIXON: What major changes in the area have you seen during your life time?

WHITLOW: There are so many. Wow, let's see. The old courthouse, they are not going to tear it down, but anyway, I worked in all three of those buildings. Started in the old courthouse, then they built the annex across there, and I worked there. Then, when they built the new one, I worked there.

DIXON: Wow! I have enjoyed talking to you very much. Thank you.

WHITLOW: I liked it!

Interview ends