

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: Priscilla Harden & Mary Louise Hillsman

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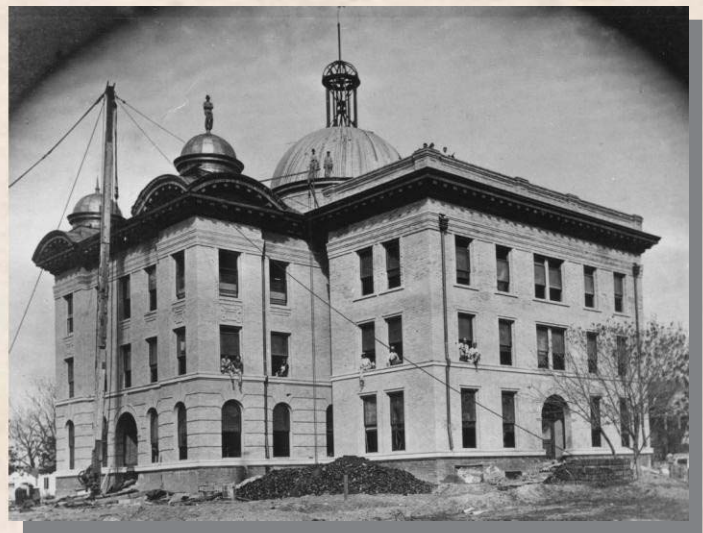
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Transcript

WARE: Miss Harden, when and where were you born.

HARDEN: Sugar Land, Texas, December 24, 1949. This is my town, my city. I LOVE Sugar Land.

WARE: Were you born at the Laura Eldridge Hospital?

HARDEN: I was. Dr. Kuykendahl delivered me.

HILLSMAN: He delivered everybody.

WARE: Miss Hillsman?

HILLSMAN: I was born on September 8, 1949 in Laura Eldridge Hospital, delivered by Dr. Kuykendahl.

WARE: When and where did you start school?

HILLSMAN: I started school at M. R. Wood Elementary School in 1955.

HARDEN: The same, 1955.

WARE: What years did you attend M. R. Wood?

HARDEN: From 1955 until 1965, till the end of 9th grade.

HILLSMAN: The same.

WARE: Where did you live when you attended M. R. Wood School?

HILLSMAN: I lived at the same place that I'm living now, 15538 Boss Gaston Road.

WARE: Did you ride a bus to school?

HILLSMAN: Yes, I did.

WARE: Were there many children on the bus?

HILLSMAN: Yes.

HARDEN: I grew up at 714 East Park in Mayfield Park. I walked to school and I would walk home for lunch.

WARE: Did many children walk home for lunch?

HARDEN: Everybody except children from Four Corners. I never figured out how y'all ate.

HILLSMAN: We brought our lunch.

HARDEN: Sixty years later I find that out! (laughter)

WARE: About how many children were in an average sized class?

HILLSMAN: I would say less than thirty.

WARE: Do you agree with that?

HARDEN: I do.

WARE: Either of you can weigh in on this. Did you get a lot of personal attention?

HILLSMAN: Oh, yes, we did.

HARDEN: Yes, we did. Both ways. If you acted out of order, you GOT attention. Then you got your parents attention whenever you went home.

HILLSMAN: That's right.

HARDEN: And if you did well, obeyed the rules, you got lots of encouragement. Lots of pointers to let you know that they were watching you and they cared.

WARE: So you felt like your teachers truly cared about you?

HILLSMAN: Oh yes.

HARDEN: Of course, they did. Our teachers were more like parents than teachers because we got disciplined when we misbehaved. They made sure we knew our course of study before we got promoted to another grade. They cared about all of that.

WARE: What type of learning materials did you have?

HILLSMAN: We had books.

HARDEN: We had academic books, but they were outdated. We received outdated books. And whenever we received our books, we had to open them and go through each page. This was mandatory. If there was a mark on a page and you didn't put it on the list, at the end of the year, you had to pay for it. We received books that had torn pages. We received books that were so old that whenever you opened it, all the spaces for the names were taken, so you had to take a sheet of paper and tape it over it, write your name and, I think, the date. I don't quite remember if we had to do that part. However, we had to go page by page by page. If there were a torn page, you had to write that down.

WARE: So that you were not responsible for that.

HARDEN: Right.

WARE: Was all the learning material outdated would you say?

HARDEN: All of it.

HILLSMAN: I would think so, yes. But our teachers were amazing teachers. Even though our books were out of date and came from the white schools after they had used them, our teachers made sure that we learned our lessons before we moved on to another class. That was what was amazing about them.

HARDEN: The manipulatives that they used were advanced, extremely advanced.

HILLSMAN: Even though our books were outdated, our teachers were up-to-date on the material that they needed us to learn.

HARDEN: They were scholars.

WARE: So they designed their own curriculum?

HILLSMAN: Yes, ma'am.

HARDEN: Oh yes, that is such a good way to put it. Our teachers were scholars. I mean poised scholars.

WARE: Sounds like you respected them.

HARDEN: You had no choice! (laughter)

WARE: Do you remember anything about Principal [Charles] Jingles?

HILLSMAN: He was a short, kind of heavy-set man.

HARDEN: Who walked up and down the hall with a big belt. He would hit the floor. It was customary. And he would tell the high school kids to get to class; “get out of my hall, don’t let me see you. You know better. Tell your mama to call me. Tell your daddy to call me.”

WARE: Were there security guards at the school?

HARDEN: No, no security guards.

HILLSMAN: No security.

HARDEN: I don’t remember any fights. We weren’t allowed to think that way.

WARE: It sounds like Principal Jingles might have been the security?

HARDEN: He was!

HILLSMAN: He was. And some of the teachers also.

HARDEN: They were strict. The teacher I want to talk about is Miss Foy. She was the first teacher we actually liked. Mildred Foy. She was young and beautiful and kind and poised and sophisticated. She was everything.

WARE: What year did you have Mrs. Foy?

HARDEN: Fourth grade, wasn’t it?

HILLSMAN: First grade was Miss [L.J.] Allen. Second was Mrs. [D.B.] Terry. Miss [M.E.] Murray for 3rd.

HARDEN: And then Miss Foy.

WARE: What were some of your favorite classes?

HILLSMAN: I think all of them were.

HARDEN: Our thinking was guided. You liked every class and you liked every teacher. I liked every class and every teacher. It was a way of life.

WARE: Tell me about extra-curricular activities. Did either of you ladies take part in any extra-curricular activity?

HARDEN: I did. I was on the drill team and I brought you a replica of the uniform. It was a purple skirt with gold pleats and a purple shirt, and white boots with a tassel, but I couldn't find any of those. And that was it. Three pieces. We didn't have hats or anything, but we would march up and down the field.

WARE: Who led the drill team? What teacher was over drill team.

HARDEN: I don't remember. I'm sorry. I have no idea.

HILLSMAN: I think the only extra-curricular activity I did was Glee Club a couple of years.

WARE: Who was head of Glee Club?

HILLSMAN: Was that Mrs. [Zenobia] Ward?

HARDEN: Yes! Yes, Rothwell's mom.

WARE: What do you remember about Miss Ward?

HARDEN: Oh, I would have gone home with her.

HILLSMAN: Very nice.

HARDEN: She loved you.

HILLSMAN: Everybody loved her.

HARDEN: You didn't even have to be jealous. You didn't have to tell anybody "it's my turn." She was the mother, the grandmother, the counsellor. She was everything. I have a chill! And it is not from the cool in this room. Just a darling lady. A kind lady. A sweet lady. A loving lady. Someone who guided you.

HILLSMAN: Like you were her own child.

HARDEN: Exactly. I like the way you put that.

WARE: Was she exceptional in that or did other teachers do that also?

HARDEN: Other teachers did it but they had a lot of strictness about them too. But Mrs. Ward, she was different.

HILLSMAN: Had a more personal touch to it. The other ones were strict: more books and learning. You had to this, you had to learn that, before you move on. Miss Ward had more of a personal touch.

WARE: So she did Glee Club. What other classes did either of you take that she taught?

HILLSMAN: I think it was music.

HARDEN: She taught the choir, which was Glee Club. And piano.

WARE: Did you have her for other classes?

HARDEN: I didn't.

HILLSMAN: Just for music.

HARDEN: Oh, but you know what? Even if you didn't have her, she was your teacher. We weren't in Glee Club in elementary were we?

HILLSMAN: No.

HARDEN: But she was our teacher. She was kind. She spoke to you.

WARE: Drill team was like athletics. You were out there with the team. Tell me what it was like. Did the school excel at athletics?

HARDEN: Always.

HILLSMAN: We had trophies and ribbons. And I understand none of them are available anymore.

HARDEN: And we had spelling bees! I absolutely loved the spelling bees. May I please share a story with you? My mother was in the spelling bee. My mother's mother was Indian and her dad was Black. And my mother was adopted three times. Have you heard of Gay Pontiac? The owners of Gay Pontiac brought the people who worked for Gay Pontiac to the hospital and they adopted my mother. That was my mother's third adoption. My mother was an academic genius. My mother was the totality of a human being who could get anything done for anybody any kind of way anytime and pat herself on the back. My mother was in the spelling bee and they went toe-to-toe.

WARE: What school did she attend?

HILLSMAN: She was in Texas City. My mother and this girl ended up the last two. And they kept spelling it correctly. So they stopped the spelling bee and had a break. They served food and all of that. They started back and it happened a second time. So they started back the third time. The girl spelled the word correctly and my mother did. Each time they would bring them to the edge of the stage and they would introduce them. For the girl, my mama said there was just a little clap. No doubt her family. But the crowd went wild for my mother because my mother's adoptive parents were rich, because of the Gays.

Anyway, long story short. My mother said that after the third stop, she looked at the girl and her shoes were tattered. Her dress was wrinkled. She didn't look like she was being kept the way my mother was. Kept was the term for "taken care of". So my mother said to herself, "If I win the spelling bee, what would it do for me? Nothing. But if she were to win it, what would it do for her?" And my mother said, "Excuse me, I have to go to the restroom." And she didn't spell a word. My mother never came back. She hid behind the curtain. So the girl spelled my mother's word and then she spelled her word, and she won. To this day I go to all the spelling bees in honor of my mother. And I'm the only loud one there. And they ask me, "Who's your child?" And I say, "All of them." I know no one who is in the spelling bee.

WARE: But you were in a spelling bee yourself, right?

HILLSMAN: No, I just love to go. I've never been in a spelling bee.

HARDEN: Now I understand why she is such a special friend. She's like her mother.

HILLSMAN: My mother was the best person in the world.

WARE: So M.R. Wood was known for athletics and for music. Did either of you know the coach, Hollis Felder?

HARDEN: Yes.

HILLSMAN: Yes.

WARE: Can you describe him to me?

HARDEN: He was a proper man. He was a leader. He was tall in stature. He demanded perfection.

HILLSMAN: All of our teachers did. We would quietly say, "He's a cool teacher." Because he was nice, tall, good-looking and all of that.

WARE: So the girls had a crush on the coach?

HILLSMAN: They had a crush on Mr. Neal.

HARDEN: He taught Chemistry. And there was another good-looking man.

HILLSMAN: Mr. [H.W.] Moore?

HARDEN: No, he was band. We didn't have a crush on him.

HILLSMAN: Well, y'all didn't have a crush on him. (laughter)

WARE: Back to Mr. Felder. Did either of you have any brothers or anyone who played for him?

HARDEN: No, my brothers came later.

HILLSMAN: My brothers didn't participate in sports.

HARDEN: The oldest brother of mine I don't think went to M. R. Wood. I think they all started at Dulles.

WARE: You mentioned Mr. Moore, who was the band director. Did either of you have any personal experience with him?

HARDEN: Mr. Moore was a sophisticated man that you would honor, just to look at him. Very intellectual.

WARE: Harlan Moore was band, correct?

HARDEN: I don't recall his first name, but Mr. Moore was the band teacher.

[Pause for videographer]

WARE: Starting back up, Miss Hillsman is going to tell me about one of the teachers she remembers.

HILLSMAN: One of our famous teachers. She was even more of a disciplinarian than Mr. Jingles was.

HARDEN: Let me see, who is that?

HILLSMAN: Miss [Annie M.] Scott, our math teacher.

HARDEN: Oh. My. Word. We didn't like her. (laughter) We didn't!

WARE: What year did you have her for math?

HARDEN: She taught math in junior high, and high school wasn't it?

HILLSMAN: Yes.

HARDEN: And she WAS a disciplinarian. And before you left her class you knew your math.

HILLSMAN: You better learn it.

WARE: Give me some examples.

HARDEN: They had corporal punishment back then. That was one example. (laughing) That was one incentive to do what she asked you to do and learn what she wanted you to learn.

WARE: So if you did not do your lesson, you could get corporal punishment?

HILLSMAN: Sometimes, yes.

HARDEN: I don't think anybody didn't. I think everybody did their lesson, right?

HILLSMAN: Yes.

HARDEN: We were too afraid not to. Oh, Mrs. Scott!

WARE: Miss Harden, do you remember anyone else who was a special teacher?

HARDEN: I would say Mrs. Foy, our 4th grade teacher.

HILLSMAN: Yes.

HARDEN: She was the one who let all of us know that teachers were real people. We didn't know that they were real. We didn't know we could talk to them. We didn't know that they didn't live on campus. We didn't know that until Mrs. Foy came. We didn't! We thought they went upstairs and did paperwork and the chemistry projects. We DID. We didn't know where they slept. We didn't know! (laughter)

WARE: Give me some examples of things that happened in Mrs. Foy's class that you remember.

HARDEN: She was so personable. She didn't do anything differently from the other teachers. But hers was filled with love. The other teachers were too, but hers was—she was young. She was pretty, she dressed well. She did everything the other teachers did. Spoke well, was intelligent, was classy. She was everything they were. The only difference was that she was young. She was our first young teacher.

WARE: So you could relate to her?

HARDEN: Yes.

WARE: Do either of you remember any of the members of The Four Tempos? They were a singing group.

HARDEN: One of them just died. Are you talking about Milton Davis?

WARE: Yes. Did Milton Davis just pass?

HARDEN: He did, and his funeral is going to be this week. I don't know the date but his sister just sent me a text. I attended church with Herman Bean, the Sugar Land Church of Christ. Billy Joe Beal was a nice looking guy. He is deceased. I grew up in the same community with Billy Joe and Herman and Milton. And then there was somebody from Four Corners. I don't remember who that was.

HILLSMAN: I don't remember either. I have forgotten most of the other ones.

WARE: I think Milton Davis was the last one living.

HILLSMAN: Milton Davis and Billy Joe are the two that I remember.

WARE: Did you listen to the song that they made? I know they went to Los Angeles and recorded something.

HARDEN: They did. But I didn't listen, and I had no reason not to listen. I just never heard it. But I have seen the picture of the album on Milton's mother's wall. Her name was Earlene Williams. She is deceased and one of her daughters lived in Mrs. Earlene's home.

WARE: Does she still live there?

HILLSMAN: Is that Lindsey?

HARDEN: What was Carl, Baby Lou's [Ella Louise] son?

HILLSMAN: Carl Lindsey.

HARDEN: No, Carl Lindsey used to date Peggy Washington. But it is Carl. I can't think of his last name.

WARE: If you think of it, let me know.

HARDEN: He lives right down the street from me.
No, he used to. I apologize.

WARE: It would be wonderful to get some of their artifacts to put on display, because they were successful and they did record music. Not everyone got to record music back then.

I know that some celebrities visited M. R. Wood School. Do you remember any of that?

HARDEN: I was the biggest celebrity. (laughter)

WARE: And that's said like a real adolescent girl. (laughter)

HARDEN: Not that I remember.

WARE: What do you remember about racial segregation in the community?

HILLSMAN: It didn't affect us.

HARDEN: And it didn't exist in Mayfield Park. The Hispanics and the Blacks were friends. I know some of the mothers worked for white people, across Oyster Creek. Back in the day we had only two communities.

HILLSMAN: Venetian Estates.

HARDEN: But that one came after what we called "On the Hill", which was separated from the creek.

HILLSMAN: On the other side of the refinery was that other neighborhood.

HARDEN: Right. That's where our classmates came from. That's where they lived.

WARE: So several mothers work on The Hill?

HARDEN: They did. My mother didn't work. She used iron Mr. Anhaizer's clothes. Do you know that name?

WARE: I do know that name. Is that Leon Anhaizer or was it his father?

HARDEN: His father. He was a nice man

HILLSMAN: And then, Four Corners, where I grew up, we didn't have racial tension or any of that type of stuff because everybody out there lived together. I can remember only one white family that lived in the whole area of Four Corners where I lived, and everybody else was either Hispanic or Black. And everybody owned their own land and their own homes.

HARDEN: And that's the way it was in Mayfield Park. We had only one white family and everybody else was Black or Hispanic.

HILLSMAN: And we got along good with the white family that was there. The only thing that I know of that we came in contact with racial tension was at the supermarket. I can't remember the name of the supermarket there off Highway 90 in Sugar Land. The only difference was the bathrooms. They had a bathroom labeled "Colored" and they had a bathroom labeled "White".

HARDEN: As well as at the picture show. We called it the picture show as opposed to the movies or the theater.

HILLSMAN: But no other racial things. That was it.

WARE: That was the Palms Theater?

HILLSMAN: Yes.

WARE: So the neighborhoods were very cohesive.

HILLSMAN: Yes.

HARDEN: Actually the Hispanics and the Blacks were, but we didn't associate with whites. And whenever the white kids came to the community, they had to have a note from their parents. You know that, don't you?

WARE: No.

HARDEN: Really.

HILLSMAN: We did in Four Corners, because the white family that did live there off of Gaines Road, my father knew the father.

HARDEN: What was their names?

HILLSMAN: Horn, the Horns. We even bought the house (it no longer exists now) that we lived in that my father moved onto our property when my father purchased it, we bought that house from Mr. [Gifford] Horn.

WARE: Did either of you ever come over to the Missouri City gym?

HARDEN: No.

HILLSMAN: No.

WARE: I believe that was an all-white school.

Did you ever go to the white school in Sugar Land?

HARDEN: We went to Dulles. 10th, 11th, and 12th grade.

HILLSMAN: After we got out of junior high, we had to transfer to Dulles.

WARE: Was that an easy transition?

HARDEN: With the students it was.
And my teachers. My teachers loved me. I'm serious. They loved me!

WARE: You were on the Drill Team. I get that! (laughter)

HARDEN: I used to go into the restroom with the other girls and I used to put on their blue eye shadow. (laughter) I started wearing make-up in the 10th grade. The white girls would have on make-up. I wore pink lipstick, mascara all messed up.

HILLSMAN: May I interrupt?

WARE: Yes, ma'am.

HILLSMAN: Her light blue eye shadow. She was known for her light blue eye shadow. (laughter)

HARDEN: I need you to know I got a whipping every day in the 10th grade. I'm SO serious! And I would try to wipe it off with the hem of my skirt and my mother would say, "Yes, you've got it on. Come on." One day she said, "You're going to wear that make-up, huh?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." She said, "Come on. Let me take you because you are wearing the wrong kind." And I was! (laughter)

WARE: Poor mom!

HARDEN: It was the only trouble I ever gave her. (laughter)

WARE: So it sounds like all of the artifacts at the school stayed at the school when M.R. Wood closed. And now we are looking for artifacts from the school. That's what we want to put on display in the museum. If either of you ladies come upon anyone who has a Panther's yearbook, it would be wonderful for an exhibit.

HARDEN: I know who has one!

WARE: Do you?

HARDEN: Yes. I can't believe he didn't tell you.

WARE: Who is that?

HARDEN: Let me think of his name. He was married to the Foy girl who died.

WARE: Clarence McLemore?

HARDEN: I believe he has one. I know Jewel has one. Rothwell has one.

HILLSMAN: Rothwell should have one.

HARDEN: I would have thought his mother would have had one.

WARE: He says he doesn't have one. He lent it to someone who never returned it.

We're also looking for a letter jacket. The original Four Tempos record. Anything like that. What we need is an artifact in a case to tell our story around. So if you come upon anyone who is willing to donate any of that, that would be great. And of course, Miss Harden, you are already donating some things.

HARDEN: Yes, I am.

WARE: You ate lunch at school, Miss Hillsman. Describe that to me.

HILLSMAN: Most of the time we brought our lunch. It was a simple lunch: tuna fish sandwiches or Spam. Sometimes for a treat my mom and dad would let us eat our lunch on Friday because they'd have hamburgers and potato chips. So most Fridays we would buy lunch at school, but through the week we would bring our own lunch.

WARE: Do you remember how much lunch cost?

HILLSMAN: I don't remember.

HARDEN: We made fun of them.

WARE: For bringing their lunch and not going home?

HILLSMAN: Yes.

HARDEN: Bringing it in pails.

HILLSMAN: Lunch boxes.

HARDEN: It wasn't a lunch box. It was a lunch pail! (laughter) I'm sorry.

HILLSMAN: Not everybody had a lunch pail. We had lunch boxes.

WARE: So most of the kids who got on the bus in the morning had their lunch box with them?

HILLSMAN: Right.

WARE: And they brought their lunch along with them.

HILLSMAN: We were considered as living in a rural area.

WARE: But most everyone who lived nearby walked home for lunch?

HARDEN: I'm laughing because we used to laugh at y'all behind your back.
(laughter)

HILLSMAN: They used to talk about us. (laughter)

WARE: That's kids.

HARDEN: We said, "What kind of people eat at school?!" Didn't you have biscuits and syrup?

HILLSMAN: No. (laughter)

HARDEN: We said that behind your back.

WARE: Biscuits and syrup. That would be good.

HILLSMAN: Like they never ate biscuits at home. (laughter)

WARE: How long did you have for lunch?

HARDEN: I believe 30 minutes.

HILLSMAN: 30 minutes, yes.

WARE: So you would scoot home and your mom would have lunch ready?

HARDEN: Ready.

HILLSMAN: Sometimes on Fridays, like when my father got paid—he used to work at the [Imperial] sugar refinery not too far from the school—when he got his lunch break at about the same time we went to lunch, we would walk over there and get money from my father and we’d buy our lunch. Otherwise, we would bring it. My mother would fix our lunch every morning.

WARE: What was your dad’s name?

HILLSMAN: My father’s name was Ben Hillsman.

WARE: Did your dad work at the refinery too?

HARDEN: Yes. His name was Leroy Coleman.

WARE: What have I forgotten to ask you about?

HILLSMAN: That just about covers everything. I can’t think of anything else.

HARDEN: I think two or three teachers lived in my community. Miss Scott was one of them. And Miss Scott had a saying that “a little bird told me why you didn’t do your homework.” Or why you made such a low score on your homework. A little bird. She was mean. She was! Miss Scott was mean. Mrs. Scott was strict.

WARE: Did you ever see your teachers at church?

HARDEN: Never.

HILLSMAN: Not at mine because they didn’t live in my neighborhood.

HARDEN: Whenever I said we thought they lived upstairs (and I don’t even remember if we had an upstairs), we thought they lived upstairs. And we seriously thought they sat at a long table and they graded papers and prepared themselves for the next day. We didn’t know where they took a bath. We didn’t know ANY of that. But I need to tell

you that I'm telling you this because we believed it. We don't know where we got it from. But we believed it.

WARE: I can hear it.

HARDEN: We believed they lived on campus.

WARE: Ladies, thank you very much. I appreciate your time. Thank you.

HILLSMAN: Thank you for having us.

HARDEN: Thank you.