

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Vance Thomas Cooper**

Interview Date: 11/01/2014

Interviewer: Pat Pollicoff

Transcriber: Robert Gaffney

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Texas

15 Pages



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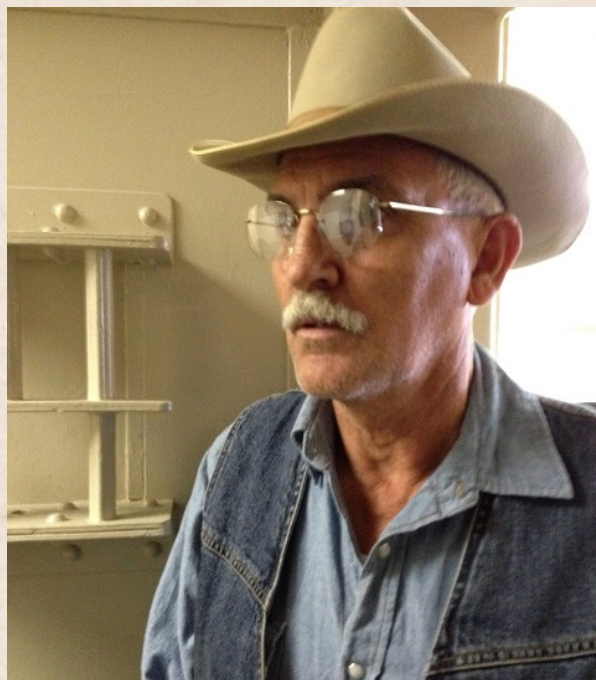
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Transcript

POLLICOFF: Today is November 1st, 2014. My name is Pat Pollicoff. This interview is being conducted by the Fort Bend County Historic Commission and is part of the Fort Bend County Historic Commission Oral History project. We're delighted that you've agreed to talk with us today and it's really fun being in this building. I would guess it brings back a lot of memories.

COOPER: Yes, it does.

POLLICOFF: Let me start first with your full name and your date of birth.

COOPER: Vance Thomas Cooper.

POLLICOFF: Okay, and your date of birth?

COOPER: 11/01/1950.

POLLICOFF: It's your birthday. Happy birthday.

COOPER: Thank you.

POLLICOFF: You were born where?

COOPER: I was born Houston, TX. Grew up and spent all of my life in Wallis (TX). Still in Wallis.

POLLICOFF: What kind of business was your family in?

COOPER: My dad worked for Tennessee Gas Pipeline Transmission Company. After I graduated high school, I went to Blinn College for a year. He retired from Tennessee, which actually ended up being TENNECO. I majored in pre-veterinarian medicine and decided that science and math and I didn't get along very well. I went to work for the Spring Branch Fire Department in 1972 and completed my Associates Degree at Houston Community College in Fire Protection Technology.

POLLICOFF: Which is basically the precursor to going to Fire School?

COOPER: No, ma'am, it was a two-year program. I went in to the fire service before the Texas Commission on Fire Protection Standards and Education was created.

POLLICOFF: As a volunteer or as a paid firefighter?

COOPER: As a paid firefighter.

POLLICOFF: How long did you do that?

COOPER: I worked for Spring Branch Fire Department, and then I went to West University Place Fire Department, then I went to Sugar Land Fire Department. I came to Fort Bend County in 1990. I was at Sugar Land from 1984 to 1990.

POLLICOFF: So, Spring Branch, West U, Sugar Land, and then Fort Bend County?

COOPER: And retired from Fort Bend County December 31, 2012.

POLLICOFF: What was your job when you came here?

COOPER: I was an Investigator and Inspector, working for the Fire Marshal.

POLLICOFF: At that point you must have had thirty years of experience, or what?

COOPER: Well, from 1972 to 1990, eighteen years before Fort Bend County. The Fort Bend County Fire Marshal's Office was created in February 1985. Their first office was in the section of this building that was the vehicle maintenance part of the building for the sheriff's office, which is on the other side, which is the Media Room now.

POLLICOFF: What is the room we're sitting in now? What is this?

COOPER: This used to be the Female Jail and the Juvenile Section. Everything on this side of the block wall was the female jail.

POLLICOFF: How many cells were there?

COOPER: There were four 4-person cells. There could be four females in each cell.

POLLICOFF: Approximately how big was each cell?

COOPER: Twelve by twelve, I guess, roughly. When the Fire Marshal was here, they were on the far side. Juvenile may have been in this part building then. I'm not positive. Emergency Management and the Fire Marshal were in the wing and they had a portable building that was attached to wing section of this building. This was prior to me coming to the county. They were in the permanent section and the temporary (buildings) together. In 1989, they moved to 309 South 4th Street, which was the William B. Travis Building.

POLLICOFF: This was the Fire Marshal's Office?

COOPER: The Fire Marshal and Emergency Management. We were housed together for a number of years. In fact, while they were at this facility and to start with at the Travis Building, they shared a secretary. In May 1990, I came to work in the Travis Building on the sixth floor.

POLLICOFF: Tell me what this office was like at that time. How many people worked there?

COOPER: When I came to work I was the first full time employee that the Fire Marshal hired. It was a one-man Fire Marshals Office. He had two volunteer investigators that would take calls for him on the weekends. Each of the investigators would take one weekend a month so he had two weekends a month off. But he still wasn't off.

POLLICOFF: The buck stopped at this desk?

COOPER: Yes. I was hired as the first full time investigator.

POLLICOFF: Does that mean you were working all the weekends?

COOPER: No, we still had the two volunteers. They kept doing their weekends and the Fire Marshal and I would alternate the other two weekends. So we had to work one weekend a month.

POLLICOFF: Had you been doing the investigative work at your previous position?

COOPER: Yes. I was an investigator for the City of West University Place. I went to work for Sugar Land as a firefighter and then transferred to the Fire Marshal's Office as an Investigator / Inspector.

POLLICOFF: Well, there probably weren't that many fires back then.

COOPER: No, there weren't, but we had a lot of inspections. This was around the time First Colony was being annexed so the inspection load went from Old Town Sugar Land and Sugar Creek to adding the majority of First Colony. The mall didn't come in until I was at the county.

POLLICOFF: All right, so, in 1990 you came here and Fort Bend County was kind of a sleepy place?

COOPER: First day I came to work, the Fire Marshal brought about 25 fire reports in. We needed to go through them and see about doing follow ups, which was impossible because we had enough inspections that investigations took second place to the inspections. People were wanting to be in business and we did the inspections to keep them open so they could operate. So the investigations took sort of a back seat.

POLLICOFF: So, how did you come to this building?

COOPER: In December of 1994, the Fire Marshal's Office and Emergency Management moved from the Travis Building to this building at 307 Fort Street. During the time we were here I was promoted to Deputy Fire Marshal. The Fort Bend County Commissioners Court decided to combine Emergency Management and the Fire Marshal's Office under one person. So the Emergency Management Coordinator was also the Fire Marshal. My boss then was Mel Speed who was Emergency Management Coordinator / Fire Marshal, depending on who you wanted to talk to. If you were talking to OEM people, you were emergency management. If you were talking to fire people, you were fire emergency management.

I was still doing a lot of inspections, investigations assisting emergency management. We would go to Austin to the schools. I had my PDS (Professional Development Series) which, all of that is now NIMS (National Incident Management System) is teaching the same thing I took then but it's a new name. It's now NIMS rather than PDS or whatever title they had for PDS. In 1996, the Fire Marshal / Emergency Management Coordinator resigned and for a year I was the Acting Emergency Management Coordinator, Fire Marshal and Acting Deputy Fire Marshal.

POLLICOFF: That's a big job.

COOPER: Because I was interim I couldn't hire anybody. So after about ten or eleven months, I was promoted to Emergency Management Coordinator and Fire Marshal.

POLLICOFF: Let me just back up a little. So you started out in 1990 as an investigator and you became in 1996...?

COOPER: Somewhere in the first part of 1996 I was the Deputy Fire Marshall. Then in about June 1996 is when I was the interim and doing all of the...

POLLICOFF: You were the man.

COOPER: Yes, I guess. Somewhere in that time frame, after 1996, we started, with the help of Road and Bridge, taking the cells out of this building. I worked in this building from December 1994 to February 2001. It was during Judge Adolphus' term as County Judge that the Fire Marshal's Office and Emergency Management were split back into the two departments. Mel Speed returned as the Emergency Management Coordinator, which was after a lot of our work had been done in the removal of the cells in the reconfiguration of this building. Then upstairs, taking the cells out, actually, Road and Bridges helped us. Their carpenter crew came in and built some office space upstairs, which since then has been removed and it has all been reconfigured.

POLLICOFF: Tell me what the building was like. How was it configured at that time? Who all worked in this building at that time?

COOPER: The area of the building we're in right now was unusable other than for storing stuff. We had a lot of "stuff". On the west end of the building, which was originally the Sheriff's Office, was Mel Speed's Emergency Management Coordinator's office.

POLLICOFF: When you said, "the far end", it's closer to 4th Street?

COOPER: Towards Fourth Street. The Emergency Management Coordinator's; the next office over was the Fire Marshals Office; the next office over was the secretary. It's where the lobby is, it's all reconfigured. My office was where the current Emergency Management Coordinator is now. That office was two offices at the time with a dividing wall. My office was the back half. During that time we had some volunteer investigators that were housed in the front part of the Emergency Management Coordinator's office. Houston firefighters would come over on their days off from Houston and do investigations.

POLLICOFF: And all the filing storage area was where?

COOPER: There's another room back where it says Employees Only. It's a cinder block room. I'm thinking that was the infirmary for the females, originally. That's what we used for record storage because it was well secured. Everything had a steel jail door and a big jail key. It was no breaking in.

POLLICOFF: They weren't worried about cyber security at that time?

COOPER: Well, we didn't have very many computers at the time. All the computers that we had were on the county's mainframe. I guess Carla (Harris) had a PC. But other than that, I don't... I didn't have one.

POLLICOFF: So e-mail obviously was not used at that time?

COOPER: Didn't know what e-mail was. We were still with digital pagers then we had to find a phone.

POLLICOFF: You didn't have one to carry?

COOPER: Around that time, my guess, is when cell phones started and everybody bought their own cell phone and then turned on air time for reimbursement.

POLLICOFF: Cell phones at that time looked pretty much like a big brick.

COOPER: Well, I had a bag phone. You had a bag that contains a telephone and a handset like on a regular telephone that had buttons on the back of it. This was literally a (bag), probably a six by twelve by twelve bag. We left them in the trucks or vehicle. Leave it plugged in.

POLLICOFF: How was the upstairs used?

COOPER: Upstairs was used mainly by emergency management. The Assistant Emergency Management Coordinator's office was upstairs, which is in, I guess where the assistant is now. I think he was housed in the same office that Alan Spears is in now.

POLLICOFF: So after three years you'd been here was it because the staff was expanding, the needs of the staff were expanding?

COOPER: Yes. Also while we were here, what we call The Wing, if I remember right, was the Sheriff's Office narcotics. So we had good security. Besides myself and Gary and Mel were peace officers, we had Narcotics Investigators across the way. Probably a half a dozen of them. Then they moved out and that became Precinct 1 County Commissioner's office. Bud O'Shieles, the county commissioner at that time, was in that wing. He moved in more in 1997 – 1998.

POLLICOFF: This building housed a lot of important persons in the county.

COOPER: The Sheriff's Office moved out of the building. Juvenile probably occupied the entire building. I'm not positive who occupied The Wing when the Fire Marshal moved out. But we still came over to this facility to get our fuel. They had a fuel pump here and this was the only place where we could get fuel. Our key went to the fuel pump at Juvenile. That's it, the only place where we could get fuel.

POLLICOFF: The building had been around obviously since 1954 and it probably had been reconfigured or changed a little bit over the years so was the Sally Port still there?

COOPER: The Sally Port was still there. The only thing I understand that was changed from when the sheriff's office moved out was the upstairs on the west end. The cells that were in there were taken out. It was made into a big day room for Juvenile.

POLLICOFF: So all the bars were taken out?

COOPER: No, the bars were still there. The females that were in Juvenile were in the Female Jail Section. The males that were over in Juvenile were in the male section of the jail. They had that area for classrooms and whatever goes on in Juvenile.

POLLICOFF: So they were still using some of those cells at that time?

COOPER: Once we were here, the only thing we used the jail cells for was to store equipment.

POLLICOFF: What kinds of equipment?

COOPER: Radios. We were starting to get some computers, printers. If any department had a printer or computer they were going to get rid of that we could get, we got it. They may last us a year because they were obsolete when we got it. So we'd store stuff.

POLLICOFF: Everything you had was stored on the county's mainframe?

COOPER: We were working on the county mainframe. After we were in this building, it may have been in 1995, we started getting some PCs (personal computers).

POLLICOFF: What was it like working here? Was the building comfortable? Air-conditioned?

COOPER: You could tell it had some age with the construction of it with some of the cinder blocks with glazed blocks. That stuff looks good today. It's just a matter of maintenance on wiping it down. We did some painting. I think right before we moved in, Adult Probation had some of the probationers come over and kind of touched up, painted it before we moved in.

POLLICOFF: What about the office equipment?

COOPER: My desk was a hand-me-down from TDC (Texas Department of Corrections). I don't know where it came from but it was an old TDC desk before Fort Bend County got it. Most of what we got was surplus from somebody.

POLLICOFF: What were some of the major things that you were involved in when you were working here?

COOPER: When we started taking the cells out in the Female Section we had FBC Department of Road & Bridge over. I was out of town at the time. I got a phone call that somebody discovered there was lead in here, as in lead paint. There was a lead scare. When I got back, Road & Bridge had every tool in here; cutting torches, grinders, or whatever they had, it was out. This looked like a war zone because they were concerned about the lead paint. Testing was done. From what I understand, I don't think there was enough lead to... If somebody had eaten every bit of paint that was collected, one person, it wouldn't have had any effect on them.

POLLICOFF: As far as you know, no one was chewing on the paint?

COOPER: So then we ended up being housed in the Sheriff's Office Mobile Command Post with their generator out back for several months while they were trying to figure out what they were going to do.

POLLICOFF: What about asbestos? Was that ever discovered?

COOPER: Asbestos abatement was supposed to have been done, according to my understanding prior to Juvenile, probably back in the early seventies.

POLLICOFF: So when you say they came in with grinders and stuff, did they cut out the bars?

COOPER: They cleaned up what Road & Bridge had started with cutting torches and were cutting it out in big sections and getting it out.

POLLICOFF: So all of sudden you've got some usable office space.

COOPER: We had some space that we could get in and you could see a little room. Everybody that was in here took blood samples and there weren't any lead concerns found in anybody. There were people showing up saying, "I need a blood test because..." They were told, "No, you weren't in the building".

POLLICOFF: Were people really afraid at that time?

COOPER: I guess some of them. I grew up with lead paint all my life. Lead probably in the water pipes and pipe dope was normal.

POLLICOFF: It looks like you're holding up pretty well. That was one big event. Anything else?

COOPER: Commissioners Court then approved taking out the rest of the cells and started doing some other remodeling. The majority of the remodel, putting the carpet in this room, staging because we had a platform in here, building out the upstairs, making usable office space up there. Road & Bridge came over and cut all the steel out. It was all during Judge Adolphus' term, probably 1997. I was here until February 2001 when we moved to 118 Legion Drive.

POLLICOFF: Were there any other major events outside of the remodeling and the changing of the building?

COOPER: The EOC (Emergency Operations Center) was activated for one of the hurricanes.

POLLICOFF: Do you remember which ones?

COOPER: No, I don't. We were activated. All the work was done upstairs. The phone bank was on the 4th Street end of the building.

POLLICOFF: Tell me how the phone bank worked.

COOPER: They took our telephone system, our incoming number, I think it's still the same one they're using today. The county telecommunications people came in because we had a phone upgrade. They routed all of our incoming calls to the phone bank. There were six telephones and volunteer personnel manned the majority of them. We had one room upstairs. I think it was called the war room. About that time, Mel came back, he took over the majority of emergency management operations and I assisted him as needed.

I was here mainly on night shift. I let him be here in the day time so when the news media and the politicians and everybody needed, they could talk to him. I took the night shift. The same thing once we moved out. Whenever the EOC was activated, there would be two or three people from the Fire Marshal's Office that would come over. We had a lot of help getting the phone bank set up from the telecommunications people. But to get other county employees to man the phone bank 8 (a.m.) to 5 (p.m.) was hard.

We managed somehow. There was a sign where I worked at West University Place. I'm trying to remember exactly what it said. "I've gone so long with so little I can do anything with nothing" is basically what it said. Which is sort of the way I think I worked here, you know? I worked here so long with so little that we can do anything with nothing. We'll get it done.

POLLICOFF: Road and Bridge folks? Was there a road that was going to be washed out or closed? High water?

COOPER: We got with them the best we could but as far as having anyone from them here during my tenure as Emergency Management Coordinator, no. We would talk to them and tell them, you know, but it was not nearly as sophisticated as it is today.

POLLICOFF: I completely understand with communications. Of course, communications are great until all of a sudden you have no power and nobody has signs either.

COOPER: While we were here the jail got a new generator. We worked with leftovers. When they took the generator out at the jail, I was able to get that generator. Like I said, I had a good working relationship with Road and Bridge. They picked up the generator, overhauled it and brought it over. We got the budget to hook it up. Got a fuel tank over. It wasn't a generator that would run the entire building. We made do.

POLLICOFF: But it could run the computers?

COOPER: It ran the computers. It was a bigger generator than what we had as it was obsolete and wouldn't work. When we got the one from the Sheriff's Office, the original generators from when they built the jail in the 1960s and now we were in the 1990s. We got a basically thirty-year-old generator. We had a concrete pad poured. Like I said, Road and Bridge helped us with remodeling this building. To be able to get all the steel out they were a big asset.

From 1972, I was with a volunteer fire department. I thought getting up at two o'clock in the morning and not getting home until six or eight or ten or not get home until 5 o'clock the next night was normal. I didn't know any different. When Judge Adolphus decided to bring back the Emergency Management Coordinator, he asked me what job I wanted, Fire Marshal or Emergency Management Coordinator. I told him, "Fire Marshal." I've been in emergency management since I got in the fire department because that's what a fire department does.

I feel like the old cowboys. I'll ride for this brand until I can't ride for it no more then I'll find another one. I was that way with all the places I worked. I had one fire chief ask me one day, "Vance, are you looking for another job?" Don't ask Vance Cooper a question because he's going to give you an answer. It may get him in trouble but he'll give you an answer. I was reading some article and I put it down and looked at him and said, "Yes, sir." That answer cost me a promotion. I told him, "That's how I found this job. I was looking for a job when I found this one."

POLLICOFF: Do you remember any major investigations that occurred during your time that you were in this building?

COOPER: One case was when I was still in the Travis Building when the district attorney was removed from office around 1994. There was a house fire out in Wallis. It was in Fort Bend County. It would have been before Judge Molina was elected Sheriff. Then the Needville school fire. The other big fires were all after we were out of here.

POLLICOFF: Has anything strange happened while you worked here?

COOPER: Different people say, "I heard somebody coming down the stairs, I heard people talking." Like I said, I spent hours in here at night by myself. We used the isolation cells upstairs for evidence storage. There were two of them. That's where we kept our evidence. I took care of all of the evidence.

POLLICOFF: You don't recall any strange things happening while you were here?

COOPER: No, other than a rat running in here and there.

POLLICOFF: This is a solid building?

COOPER: They took the roof off and put a new roof on; new type of roof while we were here.

POLLICOFF: When was that?

COOPER: It was after 1996, before 2001, I guess; before Judge Adolphus. We got a rainstorm and that roof leaked and soaked all my certificates that were on the wall. Mel Speed was still here. I had a leather briefcase that I made and I left it here over the weekend. Ruined my briefcase.

POLLICOFF: How big a rain was that?

COOPER: It was just a typical rain, you know. They took the tar and gravel off and they sprayed this new paint stuff, vinyl. It was supposed to be the best there is. All it did was sort of puddle and make the rain run in better.

POLLICOFF: (LAUGHS). So they didn't really replace it. They just didn't repair it.

COOPER: They just didn't repair it properly.

POLLICOFF: Did the building have other issues?

COOPER: The air conditioners were obsolete. The windows used to open because this building originally was not air-conditioned. It had a boiler over on the other side of the Sally port. Upstairs there's big duct work that takes up a lot of space today. I think it's still there. It's at least an eight-by-eight, maybe ten-by-ten duct from the downstairs to the upstairs.

POLLICOFF: That was really the boiler for heating.

COOPER: That was the only thing it was heating. I think they put an air conditioner in the sheriff's office. You can look and see where the brick had been cut out and been replaced. Oh, when I came to work here that boiler was taken out and the air conditioners were put in. Not the ones now. I think they've been replaced two or three times; the air conditioners and heaters have been upgraded.

POLLICOFF: Who did you work with while you were here? You named a couple of people.

COOPER: Gary Tilton was my boss. He was the Fire Marshal. Mel Speed was the Emergency Management Coordinator. Carla Harris was our secretary. Ron Bolyard worked with Mel in emergency management. That was our paid staff. We hired a young lady, Denise Santana. We didn't share secretaries here. Mel was able to hire her part time. I don't remember what year. Then the next budget cycle she was full time.

When we moved over here, Linda Barnes was secretary. Carla left at the Travis Building. Linda Barnes was our secretary when we came over here (307 Fort Street). In 2001 we moved to 118 Legion, which was the Fort Bend County Offices, it was originally Adult Probation, Precinct 1 JP (Justice of the Peace), Precinct 1 Constable. Those three moved out of that building and Juvenile moved in, so I've been following Juvenile around. We moved out of 118 Legion in 2007. We moved to a double-wide (trailer) in 2007 and then in October 2009 we moved into 1421 Eugene Hyman Circle.

POLLICOFF: Did you retire from the county?

COOPER: Yes, I retired from the county December 31, 2012.

POLLICOFF: Do you miss it?

COOPER: Some days a little of it and some days I don't miss any of it. I'm thoroughly enjoying my retirement. People ask, "What did you do yesterday?" I don't have to keep a log for anybody anymore.

POLLICOFF: (chuckles) Favorite memories in your time working here in this building?

COOPER: I guess Thanksgiving and Christmas because everybody would bring something to eat. Fort Bend County was a family back then. Now it feels like a business. When I came to work, there were four people in the two offices. There were five of us. When I retired there were ten. There were three in the Fire Marshal's Office when I came in 1990. When I left in 2012 there were ten people in the office. A secretary and two clerks, a fire marshal, and six investigator / inspectors, which is not what Fort Bend County needed. When Fort Bend County created the Fire Marshal's Office they probably needed five investigator / inspectors then. They needed to be a five to seven man department then. They probably need fifteen to twenty people today.

POLLICOFF: Because of inspections?

COOPER: Because of the inspections, awareness, training, public education. We did not do any public education to speak of. Just trying to keep up with the growth. Fort Bend County should have had something like the Sheriff's Office, the DARE program, where they go to the schools. Fort Bend County needs a fire prevention person. If we can get fire prevention to kindergarten, first through the fifth grade it would be good. After the fifth grade, forget it.

POLLICOFF: How big a fire problem did the county have during your time here?

COOPER: In Sugar Land we didn't have all that many fires. But life safety...

POLLICOFF: Did you cover the entire county?

COOPER: Fort Bend County Fire Marshal's Office covers all of the unincorporated area of Fort Bend County, which was a lot. Sugar Land has grown a lot. Missouri City has grown a lot, Rosenberg has grown a lot. Those three are incorporated cities... Stafford is land locked. Richmond hasn't annexed that much and you've had other little cities pop up, Fairchild. Orchard.

POLLICOFF: That's a big territory.

COOPER: Yeah. We coordinated a lot of fire protection and all the investigations for everything except Rosenberg, Richmond, Sugar Land, Stafford, and Missouri City. And then we helped them, as needed, on investigations.

POLLICOFF: So really your favorite time here was the people you worked with.

COOPER: The people I worked with.

POLLICOFF: That's what made this job and you made it such a great part of you.

COOPER: And when I retired I told the Commissioners Court that I enjoyed working for the people; that I did it for the people.

POLLICOFF: It's been a pleasure. Thank you very much. We appreciate your time today.