

Texas City / World War II Oral History Project

Audited Transcript

Interviewee: Holman Lilienstern

Interviewer: Vivi Hoang

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Transcriber: Vivi Hoang

Audio audited by: Luke Alvey-Henderson and Rebecca Snow

[0:00]

Vivi Hoang: This is Vivi Hoang. I'm here with Holman Lilienstern. We're in the meeting room at Moore Memorial Public Library in Texas City, Texas. This interview is for an oral history project about Texas City during World War II. Today is May 10, 2012.

Okay, Mr. Lilienstern, when is your birthday, and how old are you?

Holman Lilienstern: I was born in 1914 and I am 97, be 98 in July.

VH: And you were born in Mount Pleasant and after law school you practiced law there for a few years.

HL: Yes.

VH: Okay. And then you were in the Army, I just wanted to double-check, from 1941 to 1946, after which you returned to Mount Pleasant, is that right?

HL: That's basically correct.

VH: Okay.

HL: I was discharged, I believe, in 1946. But I didn't get back here 'til early the next year.

VH: I see. Okay. When did you come to Texas City?

HL: The Texas City explosion drew my attention to this area. Also, the fact that a lifelong friend of my mind, who was also born in Mount Pleasant, he married a Texas City girl and he became acquainted with Victoria Nunez. It's an old, old family here. And he became interested—he was, at that time, district attorney up at Mount Pleasant. He persuaded me to have a look at Texas City because the explosion had happened. There was a dearth of lawyers in Texas City at that time and just a lot of legal business going on.

[2:13]

The town was very crowded. It was rather unlike what it is today. Texas City was one of the busiest places I ever saw! (Laughs) Every—Monsanto was rebuilding, the whole town was in the throes of rectifying their own lives, getting started again. That was just a busy period. From the very first day that we opened our office here, we made a little money. (Laughs.) And we never looked back; we had a good business here in Texas City.

Texas City has been a very wonderful place for me and my family. My wife and I, however, had no place to stay. We rented a small apartment in, oh, what's the name, I thought I'd never forget the name of it, 3rd Avenue Villas, that's where we first lived for a very short time. In the meantime, we had started our house construction in Sunset Terrace and later moved there. My wife became the home economics teacher here in the high school right away.

We were—just anything we wanted to do, we (snaps fingers) just like that and it was there. For breakfast we would go down to Anne's restaurant on Sixth Street North. Everything was concentrated on 6th Street. Anne's Café in the morning, if you want to eat breakfast there, there was a line from the front door and you stood on the sidewalk for a little while before you even got inside the building.

[4:23]

Texas City also had a very compact business area there. We had a men's store. We had a ladies' to-wear store. We had a general merchandise store. There were specialties like sporting goods. We had appliance stores, furniture stores, everything here. Most of them were small-time merchants. And we knew everyone and they knew everyone, too.

So it was a busy and rather happy, for me, time. Many people were grieving because they had lost people in that terrible disaster. Mrs. Nunez's husband, they never found

him after the explosion. He was a fireman. She was able to build a house out across from me on 11th Avenue North. And Dean Nugent built his home next to Mary Emmett F. Lowry on 11th Street. So in a general way, I'm glad you've afforded me the opportunity to expand a little bit on my life.

[6:09]

I graduated from Texas A&M in 1934 and didn't have any idea what I was about, really. (Laughs.) I—jobs were very, very difficult. This was 1934, the heart of the Depression. My father and mother stretched everything they could do to send my brother and me to school. He went directly to the University of Texas and I, to Texas A&M.

When I got out, I just had a liberal arts degree, and my ROTC training got me in the ranks of a reserve officer in the Army.

I hate to give you all these things but it's leading up to the fact. Because I had ROTC training, I became a second lieutenant in the reserve and when I got to be twenty-one—I was only twenty when I got out of college—our law practice in Mount Pleasant wasn't all that great. And my partner and I thought it'd be best if I took a six-month tour of duty in the Army. This was 1941.

I went into the Army in August of 1941 intending to get out right after Christmas. But Christmas came and went and the big disaster in Hawaii occurred on December the 7th of 1941. And instead of getting out the next month, I got out some five years later. (Laughs.)

It's funny now but it was a disaster then for me. It took me away from the law practice. I was none too adept as a young lawyer when I started practice in 1937 but I would have been a whole lot better had I stayed there. (Laughs.)

[8:47]

And when I got out, I just—it was just like starting all over again. I got employment right away in Mount Pleasant working for another lawyer. And I ran for office and became city attorney there and Dean Nugent also ran for office and he became the district attorney, a much better job than mine. (Laughs.)

Anyway, that was my background. I was in a combat division, 104th Infantry Division. We went to Europe and we landed on D-Day plus thirty. Landed right there on the peninsula right where the invasion took place and went right on into combat there soon after that. About six months after that, we liberated the Belgium and Holland. The cities had been fortified by the Germans and we had reduced those fortifications. From that end, we

crossed into Germany and were in combat for about eleven months. And it was very severe fighting.

I'm alive today because I became a staff officer. At the division level, I was an assistant G3 [General Staff Level office for Operations and Plans] there, plans and training and operations, which meant we had to get out all the orders and so forth, establish the CPs and send advance parties up as we move forward. A little nucleus of specialists would go up and establish the CP for headquarters to be at this location that had been set by higher ranking officers.

VH: What are CPs?

HL: Command posts. Command post is the beginning of a headquarters in the case I'm talking about. This would be a little command post. It would have a G2 [General Staff Level office for Military Intelligence] there, which is intelligence, they would have a G3, very important officers. And we would set that up and our enlisted people, who were very smart and quick, got with telephone lines. We would lay telephone lines forward to this advanced position and then we would maintain it until they got up here, got up there.

[12:05]

Our—what I'm telling you now is that I didn't have a rifle in my hand all the time. I didn't go up and engage people in rifle fire. I was about a half a mile behind them. We had to go up to those locations to interact with, in my case, the G3 section for the regiment. A certain one. We had three regiments, you see, that were fighting a portion of the— (unintelligible).

I've talked a lot maybe I ought to stop and let you talk now.

VH: No, no, you've been anticipating my questions and already answered a lot of them. But I can go back—I was wondering what your first impression of Texas City was when you first arrived here?

HL: Well, I'll expand a little on that. Texas City had one highway. If I remember it, the only one to Houston was a winding road that started on 6th Street and it would go a couple of blocks and it would turn left and then it'd be (bumps microphone) bumping, bumping, bumping and turn right, and then we would wander around and out there somewhere we would hit the highway and turn right.

Road development was very poor. Vastly underbuilt at that time. There were no houses much that were not occupied. We had a bunch of churches. We've always had churches,

thank God for that. Our churches were all good ones, as far as I'm concerned. I was a member of the Methodist church. And I attended, and still do, the same church that I came here and later joined, First United Methodist Church. It's hurting for members right now; you might come there, Vivi. (Laughs.)

VH: Well, thank you for the invitation.

[14:40]

HL: I'd appreciate it if you'd come there and I'd introduce you. (Laughs.) Make a Christian out of you if you're not. (Both laugh.) Okay, now is that enough, or do you want some more?

VH: Oh, I did have a couple others. You said that you settled in Sunset Terrace?

HL: Yeah.

VH: That was on 11th Avenue North, is that correct?

HL: Well, 13th Avenue was, that runs from east to west. That divided 13th Avenue—Snug Harbor—you know the Snug Harbor? Those were little, small houses built just south of 13th Avenue North to accommodate people during the war. They're still occupied and it's a nice area.

Sunset Terrace was just beginning to develop. I bought a house, my wife and I, bought a lot, rather, and we had to build our own house.

VH: Was that pretty standard for that neighborhood because it was so new at that time? Was that pretty normal for that time?

HL: It was not. It was hard to build a house. Carpenters were not all that available. Materials were hard to get. We were lucky that way. Our house started construction before we ever got down here. (Laughs.)

And we also had to build our own building. We built that, started it before we moved down here. There were no offices desirable—we didn't think there were any available, so we built a little building.

VH: Where was that located?

[16:51]

HL: It was on 7th Avenue, just west of 6th Street, about one block. We were real close to the Texas City National Bank. It no longer exists, but its building is still there on that corner. And it was a very busy place at that time.

Another pioneer, Mrs. Noble, was the president of that bank at that time. Her husband was one time a county commissioner here in Galveston County. And she was an excellent person and an excellent banker. She did a lot for Texas City.

Let's see what else I could tell you. The town—my memory is fading about how far north the city actually went at that time. When I was appointed city attorney, that was about late 1947 or beginning of 1948. They had plans to extend 7th Street, which would parallel 6th Street North, going north, to I think perhaps it went to 19th Street—19th Avenue—but I'm not certain about that. Anyway, they had a big construction program on; the city was trying to enlarge itself, expanding its boundaries everywhere.

[18:51]

We were a home-ruled city thankfully, so we had the right to, the city commissioners could, so as long as we didn't encroach on another city, we could just take in as much land as we wanted to except we had to remember that we had to furnish the same services to the people that we took in that we were serving before the annexation.

That was quite a limitation because when you extend your water lines and your sewer lines and your hard surface streets, you're spending a bunch of money. Just a whole lot. And you have to float bond issues and all that sort of thing to acquire the money.

Texas City did it. We were very lucky because we had a big tax base. We had all of these industries here. We shared Carbide, Union Carbide was its name, with La Marque. La Marque had a little bit of it as far as the school district was concerned, they had part, so they shared with our good fortune.

[20:12]

VH: During your time as city attorney, what would you say were the biggest issues facing the city? Sounds like expansion was one of them.

HL: Well, right off the bat, we were a segregated area as far as blacks were concerned. I believe Texas City had converted so that the blacks were able to intermingle with whites in public eating places and bathrooms, public bathrooms and things like that. But they hadn't had that privilege very long.

There was a time when I was younger, during the war for example, the blacks had their own—if you wanted to go to a water fountain and take a drink, the blacks had to go to their own. They had their private schools.

When I got here, Texas City as still segregated as far as their schools were concerned. I happened to be the city attorney when the lawsuit was brought against us to desegregate. And that was a very important action. But we were you could say reconciled. Actually the community was ready for that

VH: What makes you say that?

HL: What?

VH: What makes you say that?

HL: They did not raise any Cain with anybody; they didn't go out and riot in the streets or anything. They knew that it was coming because it was in other places of the United States and the Supreme Court had ruled on that. That's what we used to say, that the schools were free to the blacks as well as the whites because they were equal. They were not, actually, equal. They were far inferior to the white schools. All facilities were.

[22:40]

That was the first. The next one was a man by the name of Vincent who was the principal of Booker T. Washington School, which was the segregated school that was desegregated earlier than what I'm telling you right now. But the blacks, or at least some of them, were very sensitive to be sure that they got all the rights that they were entitled to have. I don't blame them at all.

So the superin—the principal didn't like one of the teachers. He thought this teacher was not a good teacher and should be replaced. He recommended that to the board of trustees of the school district and they didn't rehire him. Okay?

He sued us for discrimination. He was represented by a black lawyer from New York City. (Laughs.) He came all the way down here to try that case. And there I was, a young lawyer with limited experience. Certainly no experience in that kind of a lawsuit. But I represented him. And I had to try that case. Believe me, it was a real case. There was a lot of contentious things that went on there.

[24:41]

There was a Judge Noel, N-o-e-l, who was the federal district judge at that time. And a very good one, very experienced judge. He had a circuit he had through Galveston, a

judgeship as well as the one in Houston, a (unintelligible)—he was one of the judges in Houston but he was the lone judge in Galveston.

He tried that case. He lived in Houston and he'd come down at his leisure to try this case and it went on and on (bumps microphone) and on. I thought it would never end. Every time he would say, "Well, I'll be back next week," it'd take about four, five days, this lawyer from New York City would write a brief. (Laughs.) And he'd give me two or three days to answer that brief; you had to do that. It just worked me to death. (Laughs.)

I didn't have anybody to help me and we didn't have computers or anything like that. We had our casebooks, we had our library and we had the code of U.S. laws. They were annotated and they would list all of the cases and point or pretty close to the point that we were working on. You had to read them until your eyes turned red and black and blue (laughs) and you wouldn't be through, either.

Somehow I got through all that. And you know, I won that case. I never felt so good in all my life. It was a triumph for Holman Lilienstern. (Laughs.) Didn't increase my salary a whole lot (both laugh) but it did me a world of good and gave me a lot of confidence.

[26:55]

After that, I tried every case that came up for the school district or the city. I had no assistance in either one of them and I wasn't even a full-time city attorney nor was I a full-time school attorney. I had to make my living—because I didn't make enough money from either one of them—to support me. You know, it changed after I got out of there and they promptly raised everybody's salaries up (laughs) to a living wage.

VH: Oh my goodness.

HL: After I resigned, about 1989, the—I resigned, I thought I was through. These lawyers would come here and they'd work a little while and gain experience with the city and would leave then and get better jobs elsewhere and they'd call me back.

I would quit for a few months and I'd jump back and believe me, I got a little more money after I saw what they were going to do so they helped me. (Both laugh.) At any rate, I've lost my thread of thought. Bring me back now to where you want to be.

VH: Well, we were talking about issues facing the city.

HL: What?

VH: We were talking about the issues facing the city when you were city attorney. But I actually have—I was curious, with so many people moving to Texas City during the war years, how was the city's infrastructure?

HL: First, I'll tell you about another big lawsuit we had. We had a very flush and fresh drilling of oil wells here. They discovered good production here. And some of the production extended north into Moses Lake. You familiar with Moses Lake out there? They had wet producing wells out in that area.

I told you earlier that we had the right to exercise our right of annexation. We annexed Moses Lake. (Laughs.) For the value, for the mineral value that was out there, and it was a lot.

[29:37]

The oil companies got mad at us. They said, "What services are you going to furnish out there? (Laughs.) You're not going to supply any water mains out there, are you? You going to dig a trench out there in Moses Lake? Pipe sewer service out there?" Sarcastic stuff, you know, like.

They sued us. We tried that case, same way. I tried it and I won that one, too. (Laughs.) It went to the Supreme Court of the United States on writ of error. It went to Court of Civil Appeals here locally in Houston, from there to the Fifth Circuit and then right on up to Supreme Court of the United States.

I got help on that Supreme Court, now, a firm in Houston. I had no experience at the time of going to the Supreme Court. And we won that all the way. (Laughs.)

So that helped me.

[30:57]

And then I tried all the other cases all the way to the time that I resigned except when we'd come to something. We had two or three rate cases against the electric light company, Texas-New Mexico Company, but not too much of that.

When I got another lawyer, then I would attend those trials and I would try to soak up all that he was doing that was different from what I was doing. I would sit in the second seat and he would sit in the front seat. That's about it. I could tell you more. I tried some—I tried a jury case that I lost over in Houston that just broke me up. (Laughs.)

VH: Do you mind if we talk about—

HL: Well, I've forgotten a lot of it but it was a personal injury case. I don't know how it happened or what the circumstances are now. I tried to forget it. But the lawyer whipped me fair and square. He had some tricks he pulled on me that I hadn't done yet. I learned them. And that was the only one that I lost, as far as I can remember, to a jury.

I've tried a number of other cases, mostly through judges, just without a jury. That's an expensive thing; it's more expensive than it ever has been to try to a jury. There's so much preliminary work you have to do. You have to do motions and you have to do, subpoena, a lot of stuff and all that.

Anyway, I'll subside now and let you begin again.

[33:09]

VH: I have just one last question.

HL: All right.

VH: I know we're tight on time. How was the city dealing with the influx of people when you arrived in '47. A lot of people moved here during the war years.

HL: Well, a lot of these people were workers. Either got jobs in the various industries we had or they were in construction. There were a lot of construction workers. That lasted a good long while. In the meantime, we were—the city was hard at work expanding our boundaries and building out towards our boundaries. We had many successes with industry. We had a very good working relationship with our industry.

We lost one—many people thought it was well that we lost them—it was going to be a copper industry. We were going to build a copper refinery. The Japanese came over here and were very interested in us. A group living in Tiki Island and some Galvestonians didn't want us to do that. They thought there'd be a lot of pollution there. We were sure it would not be.

We had Congressional help and the senator came down here, U.S. senator, and worked with us. But they were too strong politically. They had some good arguments on their side. Anyway, I'm glad it turned out that way. That would have divided our common purpose and it would have put a lot of people to work. Yeah.

Well, are you through with me now?

VH: I think I'm good. Is there anything you would like to add?

HL: (Laughs.) It's been a pleasure for me to talk to you.

VH: Well I've really—

HL: And you haven't been hard on me at all. You haven't asked for any precise dates; I couldn't have given them to you anyhow.

VH: It was more about your recollections, which you gave me a lot of great material.

HL: Well, I'm glad.

[35:46]