

Texas City / World War II Oral History Project

Audited Transcript

Interviewee: Robert J. Updegrove

Interviewer: Luke Alvey-Henderson

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[00:02]

L: The date is April 4, 2012. I am Luke Alvey-Henderson and I am interviewing Joe Updegrove for the Texas City Oral History Project. We are at the Moore Memorial Public Library. And the first question is: What brought you to Texas City?

R: Well I came here to work for Monsanto. In a new unit that they were at the time building. And they weren't ready to staff that unit yet, so I worked assigned temporarily to the technical department. And I worked at this plant for eight years or nine years. And worked in several parts of the plant, several areas, as the plant situation changed and as my experience improved.

L: And when you came in 1951, could you still see evidence of the damage from the 1947 explosion around town?

R: Oh yes, it was plentiful. There's still some around right now, if you look for it. Only four years after the blast it was easy to find.

L: And when you came where did you stay when you first lived in Texas City?

R: First place I lived was in the Chelsea Apartments. We rented a furnished apartment on Hunter Drive. And as we acquired belongings, we moved into an unfurnished apartment and lived there for several years.

L: Great. What was your first impression of Texas City at the time, when you came here?

[2:07]

R: Oh it was wonderful. Wonderful. Just for comparison: The day before we came here for an interview I was in Lake Charles for an interview. We arrived in Lake Charles late afternoon. Let's say five o'clock. After dinner we went to a movie. When we came out of the movie we discovered that the high school had caught fire and had burned to the ground. Library books, uniforms for sports, and all kind of equipment in the school house was lost. The streets in this city of Lake Charles at that time were paved with shale and drainage was open ditches. It wasn't very much grass around. Yards were mostly shale or dirt and sand.

When we came to Texas City, it was entirely different. Streets were paved in concrete and had curbs and gutters. Yards were filled with grass and just a pleasing sight when you come into town compared to what it was in Lake Charles.

L: Now, when you weren't working, when you first came to Texas City, what did you do for entertainment?

R: There wasn't any television yet, then. I don't remember. I'm sure that we went to movies and we listened to radio, and we had work that had to be done. My wife was a prodigious correspondent and spent a lot of time writing letters to her family and friends.

L: What was the average work hour week back then for you?

[4:28]

R: Oh, it was a standard forty hour a week. Occasionally there was extra and it was easy to get time off, so.

L: Great. So when you started, Monsanto was opening that section. Were they opening lots of sections at the time? Was the plant growing pretty quickly?

R: Well, when I came here the plant, it consisted only of a small ethylene plant and a styrene plant. They were building a acrylonitrile operation and a vinyl chloride operation—and increasing utilities to correspond to that. There was a lot of construction work going on at Monsanto at that time. Most of that work was being—design work was done by engineering companies and construction work was being done by construction companies. So it didn't involve Monsanto forces directly in the

construction, but we did have to write operating manuals and other things that had to do with anticipation of the plant being started up.

L: So, about when did you go from living in an apartment to moving into a home, to a house?

[6:17]

R: Oh, well we moved into the house in November of 1958. We bought the land, the lot, from Mainland Company and paid for it in the mid '50s. In '57 we decided we were going to build and we started putting plans together. We had adopted a son at that stage; and it was just time to go ahead and become permanent. It took a while to settle on a design for the house. I had been working on that almost since the beginning, but it wasn't ready to take to an architect. After we got plans from the architect, we still had to go and find money to do the building. So it was mid-summer when we signed the contract with the builder to build the house and then in November we moved in. Day before Thanksgiving.

L: Oh, wonderful. Did you have several neighbors, at the time? Or was that largely undeveloped, at the time?

R: We were the next to last house on Seaside Lane. And I'm still living in that house right now, today.

L: Great. Alright, so I'm going to jump a little beforehand for right now and ask a few questions just about that general period. Do you remember what you were doing when you heard about the Pearl Harbor bombing?

[8:27]

R: The Pearl Harbor bombing? That was on a Sunday morning here. My father's brother had come over from Alice and we had gone, the three of us, had gone over to Port—we were living in Gregory, just this side of Corpus [Christi], and we had been over to Port Aransas the night before, and spent the night wading around in shallow water looking for flounders, and had found some. And that morning, Sunday morning, we had come home and were in the back yard cleaning the fish when my sister came running out to tell us that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. It was a kind of, kind of a overcast day in South Texas, and this added to the general murkiness of the atmosphere. You know, uncertain about what could have happened and how did it happen. But nobody knew the answers to that yet, then. So, but the day that Pearl Harbor happened I was cleaning fish after having been up all night to catch fish.

L: And when did you, did you decide to enlist or were you later drafted?

R: Well I was only sixteen years old when the bombing occurred. And so I wasn't concerned about that. And actually, it turned out my father was more in jeopardy than I was, because he had to register for—he was young enough to register for the draft before I was old enough to register for the draft. Now I graduated from high school in 1942, and the next—that was Friday night, and the Monday morning I enrolled at Texas A & I College down at Kingsville. I went there summer, fall, spring term. Sometime in the fall I enlisted in the Navy, but it was a deferred enlistment, so that I didn't go on active duty until July of '43.

[11:23]

L: And where were you first stationed in active duty?

R: Sir?

L: Where were you first deployed, when you first went into active duty?

R: I don't think I understood the question.

L: Sorry. Where were you first deployed when you went into active duty?

R: Oh. I went to—I was in the V-12 program, which was officer training. And was assigned at the Rice Institute in Houston. It's now called Rice University, but back then it was still the institute. And I was there for two terms and then changed to the aviation program, and was sent to Alameda Naval Air Station in Alameda, California. And I was there for several months. I don't remember how long. Three months or something like that. And then was sent to a flight prep school in Liberty, Missouri, just outside of Kansas City near Independence. William Jewell College campus. And I was there for three or four months. And then I went to a holding station in Asbury Park, New Jersey. And from there I went to midshipman's school in South Bend, Indiana, at the campus in Notre Dame. I got my commission in March of 1945 and went from there to flight training in Dallas, at Dallas Naval Air Station. The day I left Dallas was the day that the war ended. I still had obligated service so far—about a little over a year from there. I had active duty, went to sea on a ship in the Western Pacific.

L: And when you learned in flight training, what were some of the aircraft that you trained on?

R: I'm sorry—

L: Sorry. When you were in flight training what were some of the aircraft that you trained on?

[13:57]

R: I think they were called Stearman trainer, I'm not—I don't remember that well. I remember flying, but I don't remember the airplane.

L: Were they small aircraft or large aircraft?

R: Boy, the instructor and I, that's all the room there was. It was an open cockpit. You're sitting out in the air as you fly through the air. Get the wind in your hair.

L: Wow, what was that like?

R: Sir?

L: What was that like, you know, to have nothing between the cockpit and you up in the sky?

R: It's no different than motorcycle riding. We weren't flying hundreds of miles an hour, we were flying fifty or sixty or seventy miles an hour was all that airplane would do. That's fast enough.

L: Have you done any flying since?

R: No.

L: Alright. We mentioned earlier you may have gone to the movies. Do you ever remember going to the movie houses in Texas City during the early '50s, or was that something you might have done? But do you remember for sure whether you did or not?

[15:35]

R: I'm having trouble hearing—

L: I'm sorry I'll speak up. Do you remember when you were in Texas City in the early '50s if you went to the main movie house, if you went and saw movies there? You said you might've, do you remember if you did, but just don't remember what you saw?

R: No. I've been inside the old Showboat Theater, so it could have been any one of those times, but I don't remember what—any movie that I ever saw there. I doubt if there were any memorable movies there.

L: So do you remember where you were when you heard that the war was over?

R: I think I was on the—had left Dallas and was on my way home on leave. And I went through San Marcos to pick up my sister, and I may have heard it on the radio before I got to San Marcos. If not, I heard it right after I got to San Marcos.

L: Do you remember how you felt when you heard it? That the war was over?

R: Elation. But I really wasn't involved in the war. I was in the Navy, but I was always—all my duty stations were stateside. And I was not involved in the fighting or the support of the fighting or the—that was just something that some of the other guys in the service were doing. And I was— maybe had an anticipation that, "Well, someday I'll get there," but it wasn't near and didn't affect my thinking or my actions.

L: Did you have any friends or family who were involved in combat at the time?

R: Well I had friends and family that were involved. Two of my classmates from high school were in the Air Force and were killed in a plane crash in England, so that—or over the continent. Somewhere over there, I don't know what happened, but anyway, they ended up dead. Basically the answer is, probably no.

[18:57]

L: Just checking through my notes real quick to make sure there wasn't anything that I missed, but I don't think so. I think we covered most of it.

You said that when you first came into Texas City really it was a great first impression for how it was laid out. Can you think of any one thing in particular that really made you feel that Texas City was a place you could live, or anything that stood out for you that you hadn't seen somewhere else, or that maybe stood out for you?

R: Well, I don't know the answer to that. As I said a while ago, when I came into town I was very impressed with the cleanliness of the city, and the fact that the streets were all paved and curbed, and drainage was all underground. It didn't compare at all with Lake Charles. We had no reservations about moving to Texas City. From what we could see, in the few hours that we were here, wonderful stuff.

L: Alright, I think that pretty much ends this interview. Thank you so much for coming in today.

R: Okay. Talk some more sometime.

L: Alright.

[20:44]