

(Tape 1 of 1)

An Oral History Tape Transcription

Of

Interviewer: Sarah Swofford

Interviewee: J. Bryan Stratton

August 29, 1979

SS: This is Sarah Swofford. I'm having an oral history conversation with Mr. J. Bryan Stratton at Sterling Municipal Library, on August 29, 1979.

BS: Now, is that recording?

SS: Now we're recording. Mr. Stratton, is J. Bryan Stratton your full name?

BS: The "J" is for Joel.

SS: Joel?

BS: My great grandfather was William Joel Bryan.

SS: William Joel Bryan.

BS: And he was a nephew of Stephen F. Austin; one of the three Bryan brothers that came with Austin when he first started to colonize his colony in Texas. They were the sons of his sister, Emily Austin Bryan, who later married a Perry. And before they came, she and her Perry family came to Texas.

SS: About when did he come? Do you know about what date it was?

BS: Well, it was with the first group that ...

SS: Approximately?

BS: ... the first group that Austin brought to Texas. Course his father, Moses Austin, had gotten permission to colonize Texas – or a region in Texas – earlier. But on his second trip to Texas he caught pneumonia and died on his way home, which left the responsibility to Stephen – who was in his 20's at that time – to carry the thing out. And that was a ... but I don't remember the date.

SS: Well, that's a pretty proud heritage.

BS: Yeah. Uh-huh.

SS: You know, to have ...

BS: My mother's family came from Austin. She was born in Austin. So...

SS: And what was your mother's full name?

BS: Marta Biggs.

SS: Biggs?

BS: Biggs. B, I, double-G, S.

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: And they were involved in ... and her mother was a Roy. And a good many Roy's in the early part of Texas, in the early days of Texas. My father's family came – my grandfather came from Missouri. Also, the Austin's came here from Missouri, although they'd gone to – from Missouri – from Virginia to Missouri earlier. And, but my father and mother were married in west Texas. At Dickens, Texas.

SS: Oh, in Dickens, Texas?

BS: I was born in Dickens, Texas.

SS: Oh, I was gonna ask you ...

BS: You may be one of the few people who've been to Dickens, I don't know.

SS: Yeah, I know where Dickens is, I ...

BS: There's not much there now but the courthouse.

SS: Yeah. I know where Dickens is.

BS: But the courthouse.

SS: It's pretty wide open. (Laughs) Wide open spaces.

BS: My mother's family had gone to New Mexico earlier in her life, and as I said earlier, on a – in a wagon train.

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: And ... she was in the second graduating class from the school that's now known as New Mexico Western.

SS: And that's at ...

BS: At Silver City, New Mexico.

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: I guess, rather, the name is Western New Mexico.

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: And ... I spent a lot of my childhood in Silver City. Although I – after my father ...

SS: Were you born in Silver City?

BS: No, I was born in Dickens.

SS: Oh, that's right. You said that, uh-huh.

BS: But after my father's death in 1917, I came down and worked for the Freeport Sulphur Company a year in Freeport. Then went back, and went back to school. Went to New Mexico Military Institute for four years, and ...

SS: Now, is that at Roswell?

BS: At Roswell.

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: And ... then on to Washington & Lee in Virginia. Although I'm a Texan by everything else, I didn't go to school in Texas. (Laughs)

SS: Well, now what did you study when you went up there to Washington & Lee?

BS: I studied business and accounting.

SS: I see. And when did you graduate from Washington & Lee?

BS: I came to – I came to Houston in 1925, and worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad doing cost accounting for 'em. Until 1929, then I went to work for Exxon in the – in Houston.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And in 1930, they started a training program for engineers, and they decided to send four accountants out to Baytown with the engineers to take their first training course.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And the Depression came along, and we got left in Baytown. So that's how I originally got here.

SS: How did you feel about being sent out here to Baytown? Did that bother you to leave – I guess you were living in Houston at this time?

BS: Yes. No, not for the – not, it didn't bother me because I thought it was a great opportunity. Of course they hadn't done that before for any of the people out of the accounting office. But I didn't know the Depression was gonna come along and I'd be left here. But ...

SS: What did ...

BS: And you know Baytown is an engineer's paradise, but not much – in those days – not much for an accountant. And so all four of the accountants finally left and did something else. One of 'em became a lawyer, and one of 'em became a CPA, and the other one died, and when he died recently was a vice president of the Sweeny Jewelry Company.

SS: Well.

BS: And I became CLU, which is the professional designation for life insurance.

SS: I see.

BS: CFM, And ...

SS: And when did you go into the life insurance business?

BS: And I went into the life insurance business in 1935.

SS: 1935.

BS: And I've been here ever since, except the five years I spent in the army during the World War II.

SS: Um-hmm. Did you ...

BS: And I ...

SS: Excuse me.

BS: And I'd just come back from the service, actually, when the – well, movement started to consolidate the towns. Prior to that time, I'd belonged to the Goose Creek Chamber of Commerce, although I lived in what we called then old Baytown.

SS: Um-hmm. I was gonna ask you before we got into the consolidation part about your wife: who you married? Her name?

BS: My wife named Dorothy Lynn Taylor, and I met her when she came to Baytown to teach school.

SS: Oh.

BS: She was born in Dallas, and had gone to the University of Texas, and gotten a degree, but she'd also gone to Northwestern and gotten a music degree. Then she came to Baytown to teach public school music.

SS: She was a music teacher?

BS: Uh-huh. And ... and we were married after the – I went on duty in 1941. She'd gone back to get a master's degree at Northwestern, and I was sent to Fort Knox. So we were close enough together that it ended up in marriage.

SS: Well. Now, did she stay in Baytown while – were you overseas during World War II, or...

BS: No, she didn't. We didn't come back here till the war was over.

SS: I see. I see.

BS: I was stationed in Fort Knox three different times in California, and then Maryland before I went overseas. And her family were living at that time, although they were Texans, they were – her father was executive vice president of the National Acts Association.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And he – they were living in Bethesda, Maryland. And I was stationed in Fort Meade, Maryland. So she stayed with them then while I was overseas.

SS: That was convenient.

BS: And we came back to Baytown then.

SS: And when you came back to Baytown then you went in – you were in the life insurance business then?

BS: No. I had been before I left, and I went back and was doing the same thing.

SS: Ok.

BS: And ...

SS: Well, you said that when you came back they were – you heard the first rumblings, or ...

BS: Well...

SS: ... of the consolidation proceedings?

BS: Well, it was right after the war was over that there began to be talk (coughing) about the consolidation. I guess there had been some earlier, but nothing very serious (coughing). And ... I was president of the Baytown Rotary Club in 1950; 1945 and six. No, wait a minute, 19 – I guess 1946 and seven.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And ...

SS: Well, at the time that this was happening, how would you describe these, the Tri-Cities? You know, geographically? Um ... about how far apart were they?

BS: Well ... of course ...

SS: In actual physical distance?

BS: Baytown and – I mean Goose Creek and Pelly just had a drainage ditch separating ‘em. You couldn’t tell how – when you were in one or the other, actually.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: In the early times, I guess they ... changed the, changed the post office. And then Pelly seceded and started a town of their own. But the original town was in Pelly.

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: What later turned out to be Pelly. They didn’t have that name until after they had been part – after Goose Creek incorporated, and they decided that they wanted their post office back, and so they started a new town.

SS: Did this cause a lot of bad feelings among the people that went with ...

BS: Well, there was quite a bit of jealousy. Pelly was – to the Goose Creek people – Pelly was kind of across the track.

SS: (Laughs)

BS: And Baytown was then across Goose Creek from both of them.

SS: Now, was it an incorporated? It was not an incorporated?

BS: It was unincorporated. Probably the second largest community in Baytown – in the state of Texas that was unincorporated. And the people going to work would ride jitneys back and forth. They had jitneys to take ‘em back and forth. Work, or a lot of ‘em rode bicycles for that matter, or at least, particularly those that lived in east Baytown road bicycles. And after the war then they’d talk about consolidation, and Pelly annexed Baytown. Then they had a vote where they would consolidate, and Goose Creek thought they were the larger and would be the survivor, and they voted to consolidate. And it turned out that Pelly with Baytown was the larger, so it made Pelly the successor.

SS: And this is ...

BS: Survivor, and so that would was what ...

SS: ... by law that has to be the larger community?

BS: ...the town for about a year was named Pelly.

SS: Uh-huh. I see.

BS: And that is the time that they decided then that they would vote – they had a stronghold at the time of consolidation. Then they voted to change the name. Put the hold on the name.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And to, uh... have a new charter made. Then they appointed the committee of 15 people.

SS: And how – the mayor of Pelly ...

BS: The mayor of Pelly appointed the committee.

SS: ... appointed the committee?

BS: Yes, Cleveland was then the mayor.

SS: Mayor Cleveland.

BS: Uh-huh. Then ...

SS: Do you remember the names of any of those people that were on the commission with you? Who were some of the other ...?

BS: Well, I can't name all 15 of 'em, with the, or what the – but from Baytown there was L.A. Wilke, and Dr. William Marshall, and myself. All lived in the Baytown community. And we had O.O. ... I forgot now. O.O. Doris, I believe. And ... William Carlson. And Elmer Gray from Pelly. And Mac Knowles from ... Hugh Eckles ... from Goose Creek. But the rest of 'em, off-hand I can't ...

SS: Well, do you remember who was chairman of that commission?

BS: Mac Knowles was Chairman.

SS: He was the chairman?

BS: Uh-huh.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And ... we started the study of the present charters, and some material on what was possible for a future charter. And then they hired Bill Taylor, who was a professional city manager. And he got a copy of a so-called model charter along with information both from the University of Texas and Texas A&M. And we met twice a week at the old Chamber of Commerce building on Ashbel Street. In the evening, and went through it paragraph by paragraph, and changed the model to – charter – to fit what we thought was, would do for our community.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: One of the Pelly representatives – and I don't remember who it was now – didn't like the city manager's type of government, and so he resigned from the party. But the rest of 'em all – he resigned from the committee – but all the rest of 'em stayed on.

SS: They were more or less agreeable with this form of government.

BS: Yeah. Were agreeable. And several of 'em ... served as councilmen afterwards under the new charter.

SS: Um-hmm. Well, I think I read somewhere that there was some problem after the commission had been appointed. It was ...

BS: Later they decided that this – that the commission had to be elected rather than appointed. And I don't know why.

SS: You'd already done part of your work.

BS: They – they were ... yes.

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: Fact is, we were practically through with it. They did have to vote then to accept the charter. Writing the charter didn't necessarily make it what they would adopt. But they – then they were to have a time, a chance to vote on it. So we agreed to run, and – well, at that time, we drew oppositions, and had a party run against us. But the original charter group were elected. And then later the charter was passed. And has withstood the ravages of time very well, actually. They had one change since that time; that was last year.

SS: Do you recall how long it took you to ...

BS: About five months I think we worked on it.

SS: Well, have you ...

BS: After it was adopted, then a committee was selected to divide the new community, the consolidated community, into districts. And I was also on that committee. As friends would say, I don't remember any static from the districts that we selected.

SS: That's unusual. In this ...

BS: Yes, it is. Well, watching Houston squire around about it, apparently it was.

SS: Yeah.

BS: But we didn't have – and really, there were only one or two people that were unhappy to begin with that caused the – caused the election and caused it to have to run against another party. There wasn't many, really, general movement against what we had done.

SS: Well, do you think that generally the population in all three of the cities realized that there were advantages to consolidation?

BS: Oh, I think by that time, most of the petty feelings against, among the businessmen and one thing or another had ... been overcome. The Chamber of Commerce's had consolidated. And the service clubs were all – covered all three communities.

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: The members – that is, the members came from all three communities. They didn't have separate clubs in the different towns. They just had the ...[Inaudible].

SS: Which community did you have your home in? Which one was that?

BS: I always lived in old Baytown.



SS: Uh-huh.

BS: At least the west side of the – what's now the town of Baytown.

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: Uh ...

SS: Um... Were there political factions in – I guess not. You said the people here, uh, there was one or two people with strong wills like that?

BS: Oh, yeah. You always have a few people that are opposed to everything, which you do. But as whole, at the time, the consolidation and the working out the problems ... there really wasn't the opposition that people had expected.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: They didn't – it didn't turn out exactly like a lot of people expected it would, but when it didn't turn out, well then we solved the problem by doing something else. And it finally worked out satisfactory.

SS: Were these people that served on the commission, did they receive any compensation for this?

BS: No. We did not. They did not.

SS: Strictly volunteer?

BS: And then writing the charter, we tried to fix it so that members of the council would be doing what we considered a civic duty. That they ... they would not be paid for their services. And as long as they felt they could afford or wanted to devote the time to (coughing) for the community effort, why, they could, and then they could let somebody else take their turn. And it brought a lot of new blood into it. For instance, Dr. Hamlet Davis was one of the first councilmen after the ...

SS: Oh, really?

BS: ... after the consolidation. And then the – in the second round, Robert Strickland, an attorney in town, was on the council. And then Mr. Pruett was on the council.

SS: He served ...

BS: And spent a lot of time on ...

SS: ... many years.

BS: Yeah, as – on the council, and then as mayor. And we wrote in the charter that they could be reimbursed for any out of pocket expense, thinking that if they went to meetings or something out of town that they would be reimbursed. Such that I – might some of 'em to find a way to ... get around that. That's the only thing I know that's caused some static, but ...

SS: Well, how do you feel about that?

BS: Well, I still feel the way we did when we wrote the charter. I think that if they don't want to do it for the benefit of the community, then they ought not to be on the council. But ... the people can sit, they serve on the school board without remuneration, so I think the council can; it's not that big a job. They have a city director who's – a city manager who's a professional, who does all of the pick and shovel

work. And there's policies decision making, and I think that they can do their homework and listen to a certain amount of complaints until they get tired of it, and then they ought to get off the council and let somebody else serve.

SS: Well, I'm sure there are a lot other people that probably agree with that theory, too.

BS: Well ... there gets to be a time in the size of towns where ... you may have to change, but I don't think we're that size yet.

SS: Um-hmm. Well, you saw the Tri-Cities before consolidation.

BS: Yeah.

SS: And then you saw it after it consolidated. How do you feel about the charter? Do you feel that was a great improvement? Course I know Baytown has improved.

BS: Well, Baytown could not have had the growth as it's had ... without the consolidation. You just – they could not have gotten along with the constant jealousy and rivalry between 'em; they're just too close.

SS: Well, how about city services? As, you know, as they were before consolidation in compare to how they are now?

BS: Well, course ... in the 19 – after the Depression, had many a money spent on anything during the Depression. And after the Depression, the community's all grown, and there's a tremendous amount of work had to be done. And ... we had a small independent telephone firm, later has become part of the general telephone system, but at that time it was an independent. And we had a good many things that were real problems to overcome. That I don't think could have been overcome without unity. The financial district was in Goose Creek, and ... Baytown was primarily a residential area.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: Pelly was still – had part of the old oilfield, and a lot of the original old settlers. And it just ... was not a ... I don't think we would have progressed. And we still are making up for some of the things that we had – still pave the streets that were not paved when we consolidated, and that sort of thing. But having been here all the time, I think they made real, real progress, particularly in the last 15 years.

SS: Well as cities go, too, Baytown is a relatively new city. It really hasn't been in existence very long.

BS: Oh, yes, yes. That's right.

SS: It came about mainly I guess through the building the Exxon refinery.

BS: Well, the Goose Creek oilfield was responsible for the town.

SS: Oh, alright.

BS: For the commun-, for the – for Pelly and Goose Creek, or one community, it began in. With their fighting, why, they ended up with two towns. But ... it was – now, Cedar Bayou actually was, was the real community prior to that time. And it was a ...

SS: It's been here a long time.

BS: Brick-making, yeah, brick-making and – was their primary industry outside of farming, I guess. And ship-building at that time.

SS: Um ... you didn't mention – you said there weren't particularly many difficulties encountered with this group, this commission. Uh – as a whole, they worked together rather well?

BS: As a whole their – they worked together real well.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: Real well. And I would say ... 70 percent of the members attended all the, almost all the meetings.

SS: Um-hmm. Well, that in itself is an indication of the ...

BS: Yeah.

SS: ... interest in the people.

BS: Well, they were, they were really just trying to solve the problem.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And it was a – it was an interesting experience. Course a few of the people had been either on the Goose Creek Council, or the ... Pelly Council. And... But I doubt that any of 'em had ever read the charters that they operated under.

SS: (Laughs) Probably not.

BS: And as we went through, we'd go through the – look at what those two charters had, look at the specimen charter, then look at the information that we had concerning each phase of the thing. So it was, it was an interesting study.

SS: Um-hmm. Do you, uh, happen to recall any interesting anecdotes, or ... humorous things that happened as a result of your experience?

BS: No, I'm afraid ... I don't. Except – the whole experience was pleasant. I don't remember any great humor that ...

SS: Uh-huh.

BS: I'm sure there were some, but I don't – off-hand I don't remember.

SS: Well, how about the media? I guess at that time that consisted mainly of the newspaper.

BS: Yes.

SS: Were they ...

BS: They were very cooperative.

SS: You think they were interested in seeing that this came about?

BS: Yes. They were.

SS: And the editorials and that sort of thing were pro-consolidation?

BS: They were ...[Inaudible].

BS: We had very – we had no problem at all.

SS: Well, that was probably a help in, uh ...

BS: Course at that time, we just had weekly newspapers. We didn't have a daily at that time.

SS: Oh, really? Just came out once a week?

BS: Uh-huh.

SS: Um-hmm.

SS: Well, I think you've mentioned the fact that looking back you still feel like the charter was a good – that you did a fairly good job with what you were trying to achieve. And ... could you tell the ...

BS: Oh, I think the fact that we were able to get a specimen charter that had been put together by the professional people as a base to start on, we avoided a lot of errors that we would have run into if we hadn't had that.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And the fact that it's – people have lived under it ... proves me happy, I think. All this time indicates that ... the specimen that we had certainly had a lot to go for it.

SS: Well, you've contributed a lot to your community during your, um ... your years here in Baytown. Could you name just a few other community services that you've performed? I know you were on a number of, uh ...

BS: Well, I guess I've been on or tried almost everything that's been done around here. Then... course I was a member of the Baytown Chamber of Commerce for – the Goose Creek originally, and then the Baytown Chamber of Commerce – for a good many years. Been with the Rotary Club since 1936, and president of it ... in forty – what'd I say? Forty-six and '47? And ... chairman of the Community Chest Drive, New York chairman of the Community Chest Drive; president of the Community Chest.

SS: And, uh ... you were on the school board, right?

BS: I spent – I was on school board one term.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And was a member of the East Harris County Red Cross. And member of the Harris County Junior Achievement Board.

SS: Um-hmm. You found that you could perform all these services and still have time to do that? It didn't ...

BS: Well ...

SS: ... take too much time away from your business?

BS: Uh ...

SS: So many people say, "Oh, I'd like to do that, but I'm too busy." You know.

BS: Well, you know, they say if you want something done, get somebody that's busy.

SS: Yeah. (Laughs)

BS: And once you get started, why ... your name always comes up; if you're doing something, well, your name always comes up. And I guess a lot of times it's easier to say yes than no.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: But then they had to be done, so... And if you're gonna be part of the community, you've got to do your share.

SS: Um-hmm. Well, you're performing another service today by taking your time to record your experiences. Because people want to know about how this thing came about, and we appreciate your taking the time to do that.

BS: Well, out of that committee of 15, I think there's only two others still surviving: L.A. Wilkey, and – who'd I tell you the other one was?

SS: Hmm.

BS: Elmer Gray.

SS: That's right.

BS: Yeah, Elmer Gray. We're the only two that still survive.

SS: Course several of these people were a number of years older than you, or you were a fairly young man. Usually ...[Inaudible].

BS: Well, I think Elmer Gray was actually the youngest man on the committee at that time.

(Long pause)

SS: Does that list look ... right?

BS: I believe it might have been Tipton that resigned at the time over the city manager job.

SS: Who didn't like the city manager-type? Council city manager-type?

BS: I don't see Doris' name on here, but he was on the committee.

SS: Well ... Do you have any other thing that you'd like to add to, uh ... your thoughts about the experience? Is there anything else you want before we sign-off here?

BS: No, I thought it was a tribute, though, to the people of the community that wished that they could get together, and make one better community out of the three that were floundering around. Baytown at that time had a water district that was – and were almost in the same shape that Pasadena was for a good many years as far as Houston was concerned.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: Just a place where people lived, and they banked in Goose Creek, or in Houston.

SS: Um-hmm.

BS: And, uh, Pelly was wasted in their own little circle when – but they could all get together and consolidate, and that I think they've done a remarkable job since then. And ... although we still have some bad streets in all, they're a whole lot better than they were.

SS: Yeah. (Laughs)

BS: (Laughs)

SS: Well, I ...

BS: One time – and even the people complain about the telephone service, but they should've been here then! (Laughs)

SS: Yeah.

BS: It's also improved.

SS: The good ol' days weren't so good sometimes?

BS: Yeah, they were good; they sure were.

SS: Right.

BS: So, uh – all in all, I think it was for the better of the whole thing, and it's done a - they've done a good job.

SS: Ok, well thank you, Mr. Stratton, and, um, if you think of anything else that you want to add to this, we'll continue this tape at another time.

BS: Ok, fine. Thank you.

(End of tape)

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Transcribed by: Amanda Smoke 4/23/18