

**Master's Project
by
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**Submitted to the faculty of
The University of Houston—Clear Lake**

La Porte

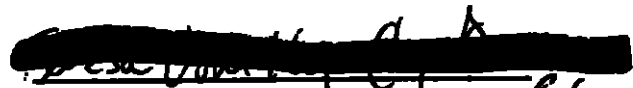



Historical Perspectives from the Small Town

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Human
Sciences & Humanities (History)**

We the undersigned, certify that we have read this project and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the Master's Degree in History


Project Director


Committee Member


Associate Dean for Academic Affairs


Dean

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all those who talked to me about the history of the city of La Porte. Although these ordinary people could not be convinced of their historical importance, their contribution in this documentary demonstrates the wealth of historical insight that can be found right next door. I also thank the La Porte Heritage Society for allowing me access to their archives and abundance of photographs.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to Dr. Bruce Palmer for his patience, faith, and encouragement, which were instrumental in completing this project. Thanks also to Dr. Van Hoy whose advice, kindness, and enthusiasm inspired me in this last semester of my graduate career. Last and most important, I would like to thank my wife, Clare, whose love, confidence, and support made the completion of this project possible.

Abstract

La Porte: Historical Perspectives from the Small Town is a video documentary, which explores the views and attitudes of small town residents in twentieth century America. The production uses the members of a small Texas town called La Porte as the focus of a study comparing the perspectives of ordinary people with the popular representations of American history in our culture and texts. The documentary uses a combination of interviews, newspaper headlines, film reels, and historical photographs to highlight the importance of understanding local history and understanding American history in general.

La Porte: Historical Perspectives from the Small Town

When historians lose interest in communication, when they refuse a lay audience, they discard history's social function. For history is to a nation as memory is to the individual. Individuals deprived of memory are disoriented and lost, not knowing where they have been or where they are going. So too a nation, denied a conception of its past, will be disabled in dealing with its future.

- Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

Mr. Schlesinger's words make a powerful statement about the purpose of history in our culture. It is on this idea that my video project is based. In exploring the history of a small town, recording the stories of its citizens and translating those stories into an audience-friendly medium I hope to rise to Arthur Schlesinger's challenge. I hope to provide a meaningful as well as socially beneficial record of the history of the small town of La Porte and in so doing place that history in the larger context of our national historical experience.

In undertaking this master's project I was not prepared for the breadth of historical insight I was to receive from the residents of La Porte Texas. Too often in the study of American history the ordinary man is passed over in order to capture the views and ideas of the "major" figures or players in our government, its wars, or our culture. In the self-proclaimed greatest democracy in the world it seems that there should be more effort made to understand the historical significance of the everyday citizen. These interviews open a unique door to the study of history. The words and images representing the lives of these residents is a priceless tool for understanding another small piece of our collective American experience.

History should be more than dates and names. In these interviews the observer is drawn into the history of this small town through the words and emotions of the people

who actually lived the history that is being recounted. There is nothing more compelling in the analysis of history than to have a first person account of historical events. There are precious collections of historical correspondence, slave narratives, and war diaries, which are invaluable to historical research. In the same way, these interviews are both emotionally gripping and immensely valuable to understanding our heritage.

The Process

In compiling the visual and oral histories for this master's project I experienced both reluctance and genuine support from the members of the La Porte community. Most people who were contacted were willing to help, yet almost unanimously believed they had nothing to offer in the way of historical commentary on La Porte, much less on American history in general. A number of the elderly people who were contacted were too suspicious to meet me for an interview. Those who did agree needed convincing to be recorded on video.

The residents assisting in the project were chosen not only for their knowledge and connection to La Porte but they were arranged to offer differing points of view within a similar context. Different races, diverse economic backgrounds and varying educations provided a more balanced perception of La Porte's history.

The participants were given a list of question pertaining to the three periods of concern and were asked to review them in advance to help bring back memories of those times. (Questionnaire is enclosed.) The list was constructed both to generate memories as well as to establish a general outline for the interview. Almost without exception each interviewee stated at the end of the session, "Well I don't know how much that I'm going to help you," and each time I would assure them that their stories, told from their own perspective, were absolutely priceless.

Maintaining the flow of the interview was by far the biggest problem in making this production. Making the participants comfortable with being on camera while trying to keep them focused on their stories proved a delicate process. Asking a broad enough question that the subjects might elaborate without straying from the discussion topic was

difficult. Some subjects were very verbose in their answers and others simply answered a question with a yes or no. For this reason more than twenty hours of tape was logged for this one-hour production.

It was also a very time consuming to compile image to correspond with the narrative being told in the documentary. Pictures were shot on location as well as in the studio. Many of the representation were obtained through the La Porte Heritage Society, which allowed nearly unlimited access to their artifacts and archives.

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La Porte Documentary Interview Questions

1930s

- 1. How old were you in 1935?**
- 2. What did your father/mother do for a living at that time?**
- 3. What, if anything, do you remember your parents saying about the Depression?**
- 4. Did you know of anyone that was hard hit by the Depression?**
- 5. Did you know any government work programs in or around La Porte?**
- 6. What did you do for fun when you were a kid?**
- 7. What movies do you remember as child?**
- 8. Were there any hobos passing through La Porte riding the rails?**
- 9. Did your parents talk about national politics and did they support Roosevelt?**
- 10. Did you have a radio in your home as a child?**
- 11. Can you remember the events at Sylvan Beach during the 30's?**

WWII

- 1. What year did you graduate from high school?**
- 2. What did you know and understand about the war as a teenager?**
- 3. Did you join the service?**
- 4. What was life like in La Porte during the War?**
- 5. Do you remember rationing during the war?**
- 6. Did you know anyone who worked in a "war industry" job during the war?**
- 7. Do you remember Roosevelt's speech, "This is a day that will live in infamy?"**
- 8. Were there many men/women from La Porte who served during the war?**
- 9. Were there civil defense committees in La Porte?**

10. What did you do for fun in La Porte?**1960s**

- 1. Did you vote for John Kennedy?**
- 2. What did you think of John Kennedy's message of change?**
- 3. Did you participate in the civil rights movement?**
- 4. What was segregation like in La Porte?**
- 5. Do you remember the school being integrated?**
- 6. What did you think of Martin Luther King Jr.?**
- 7. Where there hippies in La Porte?**
- 8. What did you think about the Vietnam War?**
- 9. Did you join any peace movements or march against the war?**
- 10. Do you remember the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr.,
Robert Kennedy**
- 11. What did you think of space exploration?**
- 12. Was nuclear attack a serious concern?**

Working Script

“The notable historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. once noted, ‘the measure of what is historically important is set by the generation that writes the history not the ones that made it.’”

The effects of events in history are not are not limited to a few key members of our society. History is just as beholden to the words of a housewife during the civil war as any general’s field orders that may have been written at the same time. It should be acknowledged that history is not only produced by an elite few who make policy decisions or royal decrees. History is a part of everyday life. Moreover, the history of the United States, the greatest democracy in the world, should be the history of all its citizens. In theory, the power of the American government is held in the hands of the people. Therefore, while history was made by the stroke of a pen in the oval office, important opinions were being debated over dinner tables across nation. In this historical profile of a small town called La Porte, I will offer the perspectives of a few of the residents who lived through three of the most trying periods in twentieth century America. The oral histories and the visual images incorporated in this production will compare many of the general conceptions about American history with the reality of life seen through the eyes of small town residents. These interviews provide a unique opportunity to explore the history that cannot be found in history books, public records, or newspaper archives. With these narratives that Mr. Schlesinger’s observation can be demonstrated. These participants record here their history in the perspective in which they lived it.

Participant Biographies

Dennis Dunham

Mr. Dennis Dunham has lived in La Porte nearly all of his 71 years. He was born in a two-story rent house on Main Street in 1930, the first of many rental homes the family would have in the years he was growing up. His father was a barber and ran a small shop in the three hundred block of Main Street until 1934, when his father began working for the Shell Oil Corporation, which had opened a refinery in the neighboring city of Deer Park.

Mr. Dunham said that he did not remember noticing any economic disparities among the residents of La Porte, but he did remember someone telling him when he was very small that his family was “one of the poor families in La Porte.” His brother quickly corrected this allegation by assuring his younger brother, “we’re not poor, we just don’t have any money.”

His first two years of schooling were in an old wooden building that contained both first and second grades divided by a thin wall. The building is now a family residence in La Porte. He played football throughout school and was rather popular in high school, a fact supported by the numerous awards noted in his school annual. He graduated from high school in 1947 and went to University of Texas for a football tryout. He didn’t make the team but was offered a scholarship at Wharton Junior College, which he attended for two years.

Harold Pfeiffer

Harold Pfeiffer’s family has lived in La Porte for five generations. Harold’s

grandfather moved to La Porte just before the turn of the century. His father and grandfather worked at and owned a company called Pfeiffer Electric, which supplied both power and service to the residents of La Porte. Mr. Pfeiffer says he doesn't remember having hard times during the Depression, but recalls his father talking about people being out of work.

Harold's father was very involved in local politics as was Harold in the 1960's and 1970's. He served as both mayor and councilman for more than fifteen years. Although Pfeiffer Electric has flourished into a multi-million dollar business Mr. Pfeiffer still resides in his hometown and stays very involved in his community.

Bill Erwin

Bill Erwin was one of six children born to Erwin family. His family lived on 3rd Street in La Porte, between his grandparent's house and the Methodist Church. His father worked a number of jobs as Bill was growing up, but mostly worked as a security guard at the Dupont chemical plant in La Porte. Bill remembers fondly helping pick produce on his grandparent's farm just outside of town and making the trip into town to sell vegetables at the local fruit stand.

Mr. Erwin was a teenager during World War II and recalls the hardship his family felt from rationing as well dealing with four family members who were serving during the war. Four of Bill's five uncles served during the war. Three served in the European theater, one in the Pacific. All four returned home after the war, but Mr. Erwin recalls one of his uncles having a very difficult time re-assimilating into small town life after the trauma he experienced fighting through Europe.

Mr. Erwin began working for DuPont Chemical in 1965, just retiring this past

year. Mr. Erwin is very involved in local charity organizations, the La Porte Fire Department as well as a board member of the La Porte Community Church.

Jim Counts

Jim Counts was born in La Porte, Texas, in 1935. He was born at home in his family's second floor apartment on Main Street. His father was a tradesman and worked for the Pfeiffer family business for most of his life. Jimmy, as his family and friends knew him, was one of two boys in the Counts family. As a youth Jimmy was involved in sports, boy scouts and the La Porte civil defense corp. He graduated high school and volunteered for Army service but was never involved in combat.

Mr. Counts found employment at Shell Oil in Deer Park and worked for that company for thirty-eight years. He also owned and operated a land survey business, which inadvertently brought him a deep and vast knowledge of La Porte history. In researching land ownership Mr. Counts passed over tons of personal histories of the residents as well as many of the public dealings in the small hamlet of La Porte.

Jim raised three children in La Porte. He and his wife Flo Ann were former members of LPISD School Board, board members of the La Porte Community Church and Jim now works avidly for Habitat for Humanity in the Bay Area.

George Sharp

George Sharp's paternal grandfather was one of the first settlers to arrive in the town of La Porte in 1893. George was born at his maternal grandmother's house in Heights section of Houston, September 21, 1925. To weeks later he was brought to La Porte where he would live for the next sixty years.

In his words, "La Porte was a fine little community to grow up in." His father

owned a local feed store, which provided well for their family, even during the hard times of the depression. His fathers business supplied material to the many farms, ranches and even had contract with the State of Texas.

George remembered the construction of the San Jacinto Monument and it's dedication when President Roosevelt came to Texas. As a teenage he took his father's car up the stairs of the pedestal and drove around the monument base a few times.

After high school George attended Texas A&M University and then returned to La Porte to help his father run the family business. He was very involved in local politics and worked as the school district tax assessor.

Clara June Clark

Clara June Clark was born in Morgan's Point (La Porte) 1933. She was the first child born to her father's second wife and was the fourth child in a family of six children. Her father was a fisherman who worked the bay both crabbing as well as fishing. She said he had many different occupations through the years, never any one place to long. Her family lived in a rather modest home and continuously struggled financially. When Mrs. Clark was fourteen when her father passed leaving she and her two younger siblings to be raised alone by her mother during the depths of the depression.

Clare June said that she and her siblings all worked to help support their household and her mother got work when she could from sewing jobs. She also worked for the WPA in Baytown during the later years of the depression. She made men's slacks and men's shirts mostly but could sew just about anything, Mrs. Clark said of her mother. Clare did not finish high school in La Porte. She met her future husband, a military man, at a dance held at the Sylvan Beach Pavilion. She married and moved as he was

transferred out of state. At eighteen years old, she spent two years alone as her new husband shipped out to the South Pacific, a very difficult time she recalls.

After his discharge from the Navy, the Clarks returned to La Porte where Mr. Clark became high school teacher and principal and Mrs. Clark went back to school, finished her bachelor's degree and later became a special education teacher at La Porte Elementary.

Monica Garner

Monica Garner was born 1935 and raised in Walmouth, Massachusetts. She lived in large house where she lived with her mother and aunt. Monica's father died when she was very young and left her mother with a large house and a young baby during the hard times of the American depression. Monica's mother opened their rather large residence to elderly tenants and ran the household as a rest home throughout Monica's childhood.

When she was nineteen and attending college in Vermont she met a Texan named Van, who was stationed at a near by air force base. They courted and married. Soon after their marriage they were transferred to Texas and after his military duty was served he attended college and became a teacher. He was offered a job in La Porte in 1963 and they remained in La Porte since.

Clemencia Sebesta

Clemencia was the second of four children born to Clemencia and Zachary Meza in Laredo, Texas, in 1945. The Meza family moved to La Porte in 1950 and Clemencia started in the La Porte Independent schools at the age of five. Clemencia describes her experience growing up a minority in La Porte in the 1950's as "sometimes challenging, sometimes difficult but mostly her childhood was fun and the townspeople

where accepting.” Unlike the Black population in La Porte, Clemencia was able to go to the schools with the white children and get the same education as they were. After graduation from high school, Clemencia married a Caucasian man named Woodrow Sebesta. Consequently, she experienced prejudice from his family and the community they bought their first home in Fairmont Park a residential community in La Porte in 1969.

Gertrude Williams

Gertrude Jones/Williams was the first born in her large family of eight in her parents' home in La Porte in 1941. Gertrude describes her childhood and her experience growing up in La Porte, Texas as “confusing, frustrating but not as bad as others had it”. Gertrude has been a Catholic, African American in a small Texas town for her entire life. She experienced a little bit of frustration when she black and white schools were integrated in 1965. The biggest source of frustration was the differences in their education up to that point of integration and the subtle ways the blacks and whites were treated in the town. Despite the sometimes-hard times, Gertrude married and raised her five children in La Porte and is proud to say it is her hometown.

Rita Zaborowski

Rita Zaborowski is not a native of La Porte, but lived in La Porte since 1953. She and her husband moved from the Heights of Houston to La Porte for a job opportunity. Rita raised five children in La Porte and became a very active and well known member of the community. She is a devout Catholic and is very involved member of the St. Mary's parish in La Porte.

In the early nineteen seventies, when the city was still racially segregated, Rita

went to great lengths to involve local black children in the community softball program. When she was denied access to the new ball fields in the completely white section of town, chose to take her bi-racial group of girls to the “north side” the all black section of town. She worked to combat racism in her city and tried hard to set an example for her daughters as well as the young black girls who played for her.

Jimmy Wheeler

James Wheeler was born in La Porte in 1948 and was raised in a modest home in the middle class section of the city. He was the second child born to James and Florence Wheeler. His parents moved to La Porte after his father was released from duty at the end of World War II. His father was a skilled worker who had a few different jobs in the chemical plants of Pasadena.

James was by his own admission a rather naïve young man who “didn’t really pay much attention to things.” He grew up in a segregated world but confesses that he rarely if ever noticed the color barrier that existed in La Porte. His parents completed a high school education and James was not expected to attend college. When he graduated high school in 1965, one of the few opportunities James had was to join the Army. He volunteered and was lucky enough not to be sent to Vietnam. He was assigned to a small unit that was stationed in eastern Africa for most of 1967-1968.

He knew a number of fellow schoolmates that served a tour in Vietnam and remembered some assimilating easily and others never being the same. The one thing, which stood out in his memory was that returning soldiers did not get preferential treatment in the area of employment. He felt there was a stark difference in the war that his father fought in and the one his generation was asked to sacrifice so much.

James married in 1969 and raised two children in La Porte. He operated a construction company many years and now is the building inspector for the City of Seabrook.