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Interviewee: Houston, Ken

Interview Date: March 17, 2014

**University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
*Houston History Class***

Interviewee: Kenneth Houston

Interview Date: March 17, 2014

Place: Houston, Texas

Interviewer: Mark Callier

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

Former NFL player and Hall of Famer, Kenneth Houston discusses many topics from his feelings when he was drafted to an NFL team near his hometown to watching football games after retirement. The interview focuses on his views about the history of professional football in the city of Houston and the Houston Oilers team. Mr. Houston has a deep knowledge on the workings of football as a business and an entertainment spectacle as a result of his many years as a professional football player and coach. Although he remains a fan of the sport, Mr. Houston wonders how he ever managed to play. Football is defined as a “business first and foremost,” and this philosophy influenced major decisions in the NFL, mainly Bud Adam’s transfer of the Houston Oilers to Tennessee. The second half of the interview dissects the current state of football in the city of Houston and whether or not Mr. Houston believes Houstonians will embrace the Oiler’s successors, the Houston Texans.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Ken Houston

Interviewed by: **Mark Callier**
Date: **March 17, 2014**
Transcribed by: **Michelle Kokes**
Location: **Ken Houston's house**

MC: Hello, my name is Mark Callier and I'm a student at the University of Houston. I'm interviewing Mr. Ken Houston, former NFL player for the Houston Oilers and Washington Redskins and NFL Hall of Famer class of nineteen eighty...

KH: Six

MC: Eighty-six. Okay. I'm going ask you a couple of questions about your experience overall; mainly with the Oilers and about your life after football and why you decided to live in Houston. So, first question I have now is what did you know when you were drafted by the Houston Oilers right out of college?

KH: I knew that quite a few players from Prairie View had gone to play on NFL teams and just as the league was kind of, especially the NFL, was in its infancy so I just wanted to have a chance to play professional football. It was a job, it was decent money and it was some prestige that went along with it. That's why I really chose it.

MC: Did you enjoy your experiences with the Oilers more or with the Redskins more overall with your career?

KH: Well, you know, now that I look back at it I enjoyed my experience both places because of, first of all, Houston was a new team, it was my first team. I learned to love it. But when I got

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with the Redskins it was more of a team and I think now having a chance to play with them and looking back it was probably the team I enjoyed playing with the most.

MC: How long were, did you play for each team again?

KH: My tenure with the Houston Oilers was six years and my tenure with the Washington Redskins was eight years so I played fourteen together in all.

MC: After you finished your pro career why did you decide to move back to Houston after you finished playing, since you played more in Washington?

KH: Well, that's a very good question. I grew up in Lufkin, Texas, up in East Texas. I had been there all of my young life and I went off to school, came to Houston, played in Houston. All of that was probably in about a hundred and sixty mile radius of where I was born so that played an awful lot into me coming back to Houston. I had better job opportunities in Washington DC area because of their love for the team. I recognized that but we always felt by my wife being from Houston and I'm being from Lufkin that every time something happened we'd be heading back this way so we made the choice of coming back to Houston.

MC: Since you say Washington has a love of the game also, which city would you classify as quote unquote loving their team more?

KH: it's a difference between a mild climate team and a harsh winter team because that's all they have basically. A winter sport. You know the difference is in Houston if you having a bad year people go fishing on you, you know they'll go to the beach or they'll go to, to their ranches and stuff like that. On the east coast it's just strictly football you can be a bad team and have a major following. Beyond a doubt the Redskins follow their players more than the Houston Oilers follow theirs.

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MC: Do you think it was because of the environment in general or the teams that they put on the field?

KH: Well I think it was, it was two choices. I think the team was presented, up there the team was presented to the community. On every Tuesday probably forty-five guys would go out to some different part of the city in some form or capacity. The fans actually got to know the players. Even when they were not pulling for the team they were pulling for the players so they did a good job of selling their team.

MC: Did you have a good relationship with former players that are now in the area, like your former teammates who still are close to football with the Oilers?

KH: Yeah, some. I have all the guys that are in the area. One thing about the NFL, there were not very many jobs. There are not that many ex-players because of, you know, attrition or whatever. When you meet a player you guys always have that common bond. It was a tremendous sacrifice, you don't see a player that doesn't accept or like another player because we all understand what we had to go through just to get to that and it really creates a common bond. You know the average, even in your high school teammate, you play with those guys two or three years, your college teammate two or three years. Well, you know, some of these guys that I've been around fourteen years playing with. Naturally you have that fourteen year friendship and it kinda goes on afterwards because of the way the sports present itself it draws you down to a small number of guys that are playing. Like I said earlier you have that common bond and you really get to be different kind of friends.

MC: After your retirement, after your fourteen year career, did you see the game of football differently as a fan rather than as a player? Watching games nowadays do you see things differently, like looking back at the games, how a fan would miss a certain play?

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KH: I guess the best way to put it is like any experience that you worked in McDonald's you probably don't eat as many hamburgers. You see how they are made, you see all the inside outs of it. As a player after so many years it's really hard to leave a game not being a little bit exposed to the bitterness side of it. Not that you're bitter with the game, you're bitter with the business aspects of the game. That puts you on a different level because you understand that it is a business. You treat it like one even though you're a player and there's some things that could have been done better. Probably things that could have been done worse but it takes a while to become a fan of the game again. You have to look at football and treat it as a game, that's exactly what it is. It wasn't, it's not an easy game. It's not a game that's gonna ever be friendly. It's a all-out hitting sport, it's a physical sport. I do see it differently than the average fan.

MC: I just wanted to touch more about your individual times in Houston and your whole experiences right now. Since you mentioned about the business side, was there any moment where you or, scratch that. What was your first moment where you realized "Wow, football really is a business and it's not the game I grew up loving and playing all through high school and college?"

KH: When I first realized it was a real, real, real business was the day I was traded. I had had some great years in Houston and I thought that they would, at least I was told they would build part of the defense around me because I was their major defensive player. One of their major defensive players. I was traded probably within two days after that conversation. Once that happened it, I looked at the game as a game but as far as a player you were marketing yourself and it was a business. I was a one man business.

MC: Did you feel any resentment towards management? Management coaches, for saying "We're going stay with you for..." and then two days later you're traded to Washington?

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KH: I felt a lot of resentment, because the number one thing in regards to all the equipment you have on, you still have a heart and you're like people. Getting traded to the Redskins, which ended up being the best thing in my career, but at that time I was leaving family in Houston. I was leaving family, my home was ninety-some miles away and all the people I'd known all of my life were probably within a hundred-fifty mile radius. Just to get up and leave to go a city that I had never been to, play with players that I have never known. I knew some of them by reputation but to go into a different locker room where you have to start all over you do a lot of thinking. You do a lot of thinking but once you make that adjustment it's strictly business from then on.

MC: When you say you obviously met a lot of great teammates and former Oilers, what were some of your favorite and least favorite teammates that you had when you were playing in Houston?

KH: You don't have least favorite teammates. You only have forty guys in a room.

MC: Okay.

KH: You know forty guys in a room. It's probably one of the few team sports. It's probably one of the things that, where you have all forty guys working for one common goal. That's about the only place in life when you work with a team. You have guys that some may be a little bit more talented than others but you don't have time to look at that because you're so busy trying to hold up your end of the bargain. Once the game is over with, once the TV cameras leave, you have forty guys in a room that really care about each other. It's hard to do, to put forty people in a room and have them care about each other.

MC: Right. Do you think that kind of camaraderie is not explained well to the common fan like myself who has no experience inside the NFL locker room?

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KH: Well I don't think that they understand. Every, almost every male and every female has been on some team at some point. You kind of have it, you almost have to relate it back to the earliest team that you've been on that you owned before there was a star. All you guys were pulling for each other and stuff like that and stardom hadn't wrecked the group. Usually when you get to the NFL all the guys, everybody at that could be a star; you have to be a star in your own position. You worry more about your position than you worry about somebody else's because you want hold up your end of the bargain. I think that the common goal, everybody you know... what kind of blood, sweat, and tears they put into it. It's almost like going to, I guess there was a movie "Band of Brothers" or something like that? That's kind of, that's how I like to look at it, as a band of brothers and that's on the two teams I was on for fourteen years. I could look at any one of those guys right now and say that I thoroughly like him and enjoyed playing with him.

MC: Did you have any coaches that, especially with the Oilers... did you, I guess not resented but didn't agree with their principles any, throughout your tenure?

KH: Well, I don't think that principles is a good word.

MC: Okay.

KH: The reason I say principles, you have to understand football is not a clean sport.

MC: Okay.

KH: I can't talk principles. I can't tell you that it's a great principle that when you've been taught all week to kind deck 'em out. Now there are some philosophies that I disagree with because I've always felt that people come first. That's why it when I did get into coaching it was hard for me to be a coach because I liked all my players. You have to close your eyes to cut a guy, something like that. I think that my greatest, if I were going be a coach, my greatest

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coaching would be on the junior high level or somewhere you teach the sport. I enjoy teaching the sport. But there were some philosophies, I say philosophies, I didn't agree with, and they were always handling people not players.

MC: You just mentioned about coaching, did you ever coach after your retirement period, NFL players or...?

KH: Yes I did. I coached I think five years in professional football. I was maybe six years as a college coach and probably five or six as a high school coach. I worked with the KFL, that team you a part of. Probably my most fun coaching experience but because kids, they put a lot of pressure on a coach. It's a lot of responsibility when you're a coach. The kid trusts you to put them in the right position where they won't be hurt and do the right things. The hardest part about being a coach, again on my part, was when you have to take a kid to the hospital or something like that. Broken leg, broken arm, because that goes along with it.

MC: Okay. About the, during your retirement you never considered pursuing coaching further into your professional career or just you wanted to do further teaching of the game, as you put it?

KH: I would've stayed in coaching, I would've stayed in professional coaching for sure. But again you have that personality conflict, and all philosophies differ. I think that if your philosophy's so different than a person who is in a position to control your life in that sport, I think in my case it was time for me to make a move and that's what I had to do.

MC: I would like to go back to your experiences as a fan now and former player. Looking at your former team, the Houston Oilers, as an outside viewer. How different was that looking at, "Wow, I played on that field, I'm sitting up here in the stands right now watching my former team play?"

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KH: I guess to me every professional player, everybody who's ever played a sport kind of sits back and wonder the same thing, "How did I play that sport?" Because it's very fast and it's very physical. You can watch the game, I'd be ducking watching the game and you'd see the guy after he's playing hard and getting all those licks. I don't think that they know the end results and once you know the end results you look at the game a little bit differently, at least I do. I enjoyed it. It was, I did some things that, I made some plays I thought were pretty good plays. Now that I look back I can look back at the history of the game and see that those players fit in, or those plays fit in. I was one of the guys who will actually be remembered in the history of the sport and that's a little bit mind-boggling. But I never dwell on it.. I mean just to be I think from that Houston Oilers team they have, that I started off with, there are probably five Hall of Famers off of that team: Charlie Joiner, Elvin Bethea, Warren Moon, and Earl Campbell, and that's five right there isn't it? Probably I think Willy Brown is with that group, so you're talking about five or six guys that, ended up being in the history of the sport.

MC: Do you think that those teams, I guess that's a bad way to say... How do think the city rallied around those teams, like you mentioned with Earl Campbell and Warren Moon and Elvin Bethea, compared to your beginnings as the Oilers?

KH: You have some people who love the Oilers but you also have some people that didn't show up. I think that I understand why they didn't show up. One year we won one game out of thirteen and that had to be very it was frustrating as a player but it had to be really frustrating to be a fan. Then you come in with the "Love Ya' Blue" era with Kenny Barrows, Earl Campbell, Bum Phillips and that crowd and it was, it was like the Over-the-Hill Gang with the Redskins. You had a city that was absolutely in love with the players, it was their team. They adopted that

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team and all these years later when you think about the Houston Oilers it's the "Love Ya' Blue" and it's been some great players through here.

MC: What did you think about when you first thought about the Oilers? When you first heard the rumors that the Oilers might move out of Houston? What was your first reaction to that?

KH: I hate to see, I know the value of a franchise to a city. It could have been a losing franchise it was better than no franchise at all, okay? I happen to know Mr. Adam personally so I probably knew another side that people didn't know. From that standpoint I would have hoped that the Oilers would have stayed here. I think they probably would have been a championship team a lot quicker because they moved around a lot. If you have that condition of where you remain in a place and start to rebuild your club, and I think that people would have wrapped on to that and now we have a team here. That's a great team but any time a team doesn't win you go through the same thing. It's all about winning.

MC: Let's say hypothetically if the Oilers were actually still winning in the mid-nineties, do you think that they would have got a new stadium built or do think the Oilers would've still left regardless?

KH: I think they would have gotten a new stadium eventually because if you look at the money in the sport now, all the teams are getting new stadiums. It would have been a trend as to where that they would have gotten the city. I mean, all those stadiums that were built back then they were outdated simply because of the TV monies and the amount of fans you could put in it in a stadium.

MC: Since your relationship with Mr. Adams, and unfortunately he passed away not too long ago, do you mind if I ask a couple of questions about him?

KH: No.

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MC: How was he as your first owner, the guy who drafted you straight out of college?

KH: I thought he was because I didn't know any better, you know, he gives me my first job. I think we had a personal relationship and you have to be able to set those things away from the game itself. It's individuals that play football it's just not a person out there with a hat on and a whatever. It's a person with a heart and everything else and so that's every aspect of the game whether you be owner, general manager, whatever. It's kind of a relationship that you form with the individuals and it's just a team on Sundays.

MC: Do you think he was deemed as a quote-unquote bad guy because he's the owner that moved the Oilers out of the city of Houston after almost forty years of being in the city?

KH: I think that you can look at it like that because... I don't look at it like that because of the... I think the reason people look at it like that is because of the personal involvement. There are businesses that pack up and leave Houston every day. You know, that take a lot more money out of the city. You actually pay to keep the Oilers here. Well now other businesses that pick up and they take money away and you've seen some of them even in your short lifetime. From that business, yeah, I was disappointed that he left but looking at it from his side it was something that he had, like the deal up in Baltimore. They did it in L.A., they've done it all over the place and simply because it (recording cuts out_22:41) more.

MC: Mr. Adams and your relationship with him in general... why ultimately do you think that he decided to leave his hometown also in the city of Houston and move the Oilers to Tennessee?

KH: Strictly business.

MC: Strictly business?

KH: Strictly business. It was a business. He was a business man, okay? It was a money making... personally, I don't think he wanted to. As a matter of fact he has told me that he

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didn't want to do it. But it was a man bent back into a corner and it was his ball of wax. If you're the owner, you're the owner of that franchise so you probably don't like being told what to do, and what you can do with it. I don't think that's something that he wanted to do. I'm not saying he was forced to do it, because you always have a choice but when it came down to him doing it he did it but I think he was reluctant.

MC: Those years after the Oilers left and they moved to Tennessee. How did the city, how was the city affected by the loss of a football team?

KH: First of all, it was a lot of revenue. When you have, when you play a professional game on a Saturday or Sunday in a city that's a happening. It's something for people to talk about all the week. You feel all these talk shows, you feel all this following, you know you got the community following different aspects of the game, you got the cheerleaders, you got the bands, and just think about the revenue of lawn and parking. Things that attributed to the resources of a team like jerseys being sold and even now the off season you're talking about the draft. It's something that fuels the city and put them together for a common cause. When you lose a football, or when you lose a franchise you lose a lot more than that franchise.

MC: Do you believe that the city as itself is embracing the Texans as they did the Oilers during their "Love Ya' Blue" days and the late 80s teams with Warren Moon?

KH: I don't think you have that polarizing figure. You know like you have, when I say polarizing, you had a Bum Phillips, you had a Earl Campbell, you had a Kenny Burrough, you had a Dan Pastorini, okay? They were all personalities. With the Texans you have great players but you don't have that personality like Manziel, per se. You have to have a catalyst like when I was in DC it was a Billy Kilmer or Larry Brown. Somebody that you go to, like the receiver for the Texans, Johnson, Andre Johnson. Great, great player but he doesn't have a polarizing

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personality. He's just a great guy, a great ball player but he doesn't have that You know, you take him on any team but he's not like a city guy from Detroit or something like that. He as good but it's just personality.

MC: In your opinion what or who, I should say, are the personalities of the Oilers or now Titans? Throughout their history as their figures who would say, "Oh wow, they symbolize the team?"

KH: The last personality that the Titans had was Vince Young.

MC: Him?

KH: Yeah. They got a couple of great players. They got a running back down there who's [REDACTED] (27.02) time. But that's the only, that was that person. I mean, when you think of the Texans just give me a name.

MC: Hmm. Matt Schaub.

KH: Well, yeah but, he's polarizing. But when I say polarizing he's a thought process, but it's a negative situation. When I give you the Dallas Cowboys, give me a name.

MC: Current or former?

KH: Current.

MC: Current? Dez Bryant.

KH: You know, Dez Bryant is a great player but he's also a personality because you don't know what he's gonna do.

MC: Right.

KH: I mean, and you could take him and get rid of him but you're getting rid of a great player. So again I think, and I say this again, you have to understand it's about football. It is not to me a children's sport. It is a very violent game okay and for that one hour you have to be, in order just

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to protect yourself, you have to become a violent person, which is not good. I'm not agreeing with it but that's what it is. Sometimes you ask people to be violent like a prize fighter, they are not gonna be what you expect them to be but they'll be great football players for that one hour.

MC: Okay, and do you think that players like you mentioned Andre Johnson, do not symbolize that kind of "it" factor for lack of a better word? Like an Earl Campbell back in the "Love Ya' Blue" days?

KH: Yes, and you use a good word, the "it" factor. That would be good. Who would you pay to see? Earl Campbell or Andre Johnson? Which one would you rather go and see?

MC: I personally would rather see Earl Campbell just because I was not born yet to just to see how he would perform and I've only seen the highlight tapes.

KH: Let me give you another name. I'm going to give you three running backs. You've never seen either one of them, okay. Earl Campbell, Barry Sanders, Jim Brown.

MC: Personally I would choose, I would choose Jim Brown just because

KH: Exactly, you don't have to go no further. It's just because. You've heard about him, you heard how... great players! You tune in to watch them on Sunday. You watch the Miami Heat. I mean your hometown team could be playing and the Heat is playing and you're probably going to go and watch the Heat because they got that "it" factor. Which is, that's just the way it is.

MC: Wrapping it up, who do you think is the greatest Oiler that you've have ever seen or player or coach, that was around during their time in Houston?

KH: Wow, that's a good one. The one with the most notoriety would be Earl Campbell. I wouldn't disagree with that because he had it all going for him. The Tyler Rose, he carried the University of Texas on his back and carried half the NFL on his shoulders and he had that "it" factor as a person, still does. It's a mystique about him.

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MC: And lastly, kind off topic but do you think the Tex . . . I mean, not Texans, the Oilers after playing those games in Pittsburgh in the seventies and eighties, do you think that they would have won the Super Bowl if Bum Phillips would have still been the head coach?

KH: Yeah, because they were very close. They were very close staying it was just a matter of adding a couple pieces. Back then it wasn't as much free agents, I don't think, as it is now. You had to kind of home grow your players. A guy could actually identify with a team and stay there. They were very, very close to being . . . when it come to coaching Bum Phillips speaks a lot for being a great coach because he got a lot of mileage out of people that he had.

MC: The last question I have would be... since you obviously played for Oilers and now they're the Tennessee Titans and you see both, you go to both games in Tennessee and in Houston. Do you think, do you think the Titans signify what the Titan fan base... excuse me, the Oiler fan base closely back when you were playing and back in the Earl Campbell, Warren Moon days, or have they completely lost what the Oilers were?

KH: Two years ago when they were winning, and that sure is the bottom line, they were filling up the stadium they were a very loud crowd. For the kids that are growing up in the area of the Texans, it is their team. It is their team and they don't know about the Titans so they will identify with the Texans. That's what'll be the people that . . . it's their team now and eventually when they do win and they will win, and when they get their personality that even if the team lose you cheer for the personality. You go there just to watch one or two players and that makes a great setting for me.

MC: Okay. Well that's, that was all the questions I have lined up. If there's anything else that you specifically want to elaborate about the Oilers or former, like Mr. Adams, or former coaches that I've . . .

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KH: No. It was just, when I was under the Oilers I probably had, let's see one...two... four head coaches maybe? Four head coaches and I was on there six years. When I was with the Redskins I had two. Just a matter of familiarity and I think that I played for one of the greatest football coaches in the history of the sport, that would be George Allen. He would be to me, he was a personality, he was like a Bum Phillips, a Wade Phillips like that.

MC: Okay well, thank you very much for your time.

KH: You're welcome Mr. Caillier. I enjoyed it.

End of Interview

