

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

Interviewee: Ed Emmett

Interview Date: February 13, 2010

Place: The Emmett home in Houston, TX

Interviewer: Ernesto Valdés

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

Keywords: Westbury Square, Cargo Houston, Bellaire, Chimney Rock, Willowbend, Bellfort, Home Depot, pizza parlor, ice cream shop, candles, Italian village façade, Rice University students, Montrose, Lower Westheimer, Market Square, downtown, Love Street Light Circus, Jerry Jeff Walker, Los Truncos, Lilian's Maison des Crepes

Abstract:

Judge Ed Emmett discusses his memories of visiting Westbury Square in the 1960s. At the time, Emmett was a student at Rice University and enjoyed going to the shopping center for entertainment. He discusses the various shops and restaurants that were there along with the architecture and possible revitalization of the center. Emmett also talks about other popular areas for college students and young adults in Houston in the 1960s and 1970s.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT
Ed Emmett, with wife Gwen Emmett
University of Houston Oral History Project
Westbury Square

Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdés
Date: February 13, 2010
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: At their home in Houston, Texas

GE: ...for volunteers in America and pick five groups to, you know, be awarded. We had this huge volunteer corps here. You probably saw it.

EV: Yeah.

GE: I was actually getting the award, so we're sitting in the airport, in the National Airport to come home after the award on Monday afternoon, and Mark looks up and says, "Oh judge, we've got a big one out in Africa, and it looks like just off the coast of Africa." And he said, "Something about this just doesn't look good." So they both start, and they are sitting there doing this muttering back and forth at each other. I'm just... you know, it just went downhill from there. That was, if they knew it, they had it on their radar. I'll never forget sitting there listening to them going back and forth.

EV: Well they...

GE: A week or two there.

EV: The oral histories I did about Katrina, really, I didn't interview any of the evacuees or victims. I interviewed the folks who set it up ____ (.56). The only one I haven't been able to get to is... is Judge Eckels.

GE: Yeah.

EV: And the governor. I wanted to get the governor, too. But I talked to Michael Moore; I don't know if you know who he is, the mayor's big one, but that is as close to the top as I got in terms of talking about the Katrina thing. But I talked to David Lopez, and I've talked to many of the doctors, Palacio and all of these folks about the... I've got some really great interviews. I'm wondering, and not because of the 5th anniversary, I'm wanting to know how much more they've been able to reflect back on it?

GE: I don't know. He still talks about it all the time. I'll tell you, hurricane conversation, it never ends.

EV: Well, it's never a real pleasant subject.

GE: Well you know, it's fascinating. People are very fascinated by it. So...

EV: Do you ride? Horses?

GE: You know, I ride more then he rides. I like to ride. I'm a little afraid of horses.

EV: Oh, really?

GE: Shouldn't you be?

EE: I'm a lot afraid of horses.

EV: This is the article we did on the mustangs, which were Spanish mustangs, are losing breed.

GE: Oh, I like horses. I like to ride. I just like to feel like I know what I'm doing.

EV: Well, while we were out there, you know, the Indians have the thing with the white buffalo.

EE: Yeah.

EV: Remember that?

EE: Yeah.

EV: Well, they had this little baby born out there last year.

EE: Ohhh!

EV: And she's the color they are supposed to be like the white buffalo to the Indians. It's just a very special, unique color.

EE: That's neat.

GE: These are neat magazines. I'd like to keep an eye on those.

EE: Okay, my turn?

EV: Your turn.

EE: Do you need a break or anything?

EV: No, I'm fine. I'm a marathon runner.

EE: She didn't wear you out?

EV: No. Actually we got to talking about all kinds of other things and that alleviated a little bit of the historical thing. Thank you for taking the time to do this, volunteering to do this for us.

EE: My pleasure.

EV: Let me do my introduction. Oh, you may want to do this.

EE: I need to sign a release, right?

EV: Yes, sir.

EE: Gwen, you have a check up there from Ben, don't forget.

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EV: I'll do my intro. This is Ernesto Valdés. I'm interviewing Judge Ed Emmett. Do you just go by Ed Emmett?

EE: I do.

EV: Okay, at his home at _____ in Houston, Texas, and it is February 13, 2010, approximately, what, 3:00 or something?

EE: 3:00.

EV: I don't want to interrupt your concentration.

EE: That's alright. I can do that.

EV: I know you're probably used to signing and dating.

EE: I sign lots of stuff.

EV: Again, thank you for doing this. What inspired you to contact us and let us know?

EE: Yeah, I read the article in the paper, and I moved here in 1966.

EV: From?

EE: Tyler, Texas, up in East Texas in 5 or 6 weeks left in my junior year. That is kind of an odd time to move, but my dad got transferred. He worked for I guess what's now Exxon and Humble Oil. So I came down here with him for the end of my junior year, enrolled in Bellaire High School. But when I read the article I went, I just smiled because Westbury Square, most of my memories actually are after high school. I probably went there during high school, that's why I knew about it. But when I went to Rice in the fall of '67, since I was from Houston, a lot of the kids weren't from around here, college kids like to decorate their dorm rooms. I said, "I know the perfect place." So we go out there and we buy

posters and candles and all those types of things. So I was just the regular driver back and forth for Rice kids going out to Westbury Square.

EV: Are you the only guy who had a car, is that it?

EE: I had a car, and I was from the area so I knew where it was. Although even that's kind of humorous because not long after I moved here I remember going to Westbury Square; first few times I always got lost because the streets curved, and you know I'm coming from a small town in East Texas where everything's pretty clear cut, and Willowbend would curve and Chimney Rock kind of slants through there, and I'd always end up going the wrong way somehow.

EV: Yeah, you going down Bellaire and all of the sudden you're on some other street.

EE: Right.

EV: I'm the same way. I've gotten lost several times.

EE: But Westbury was just a great place to go hang out; relatively inexpensive. The ice cream parlor, I don't know that I went to the pizza place much. But we'd always go out, and you had the ice cream, the candy, and Cargo Houston. That's where you'd go, and I know there was a candle shop because this was when college kids loved to have incense and candles and stuff like that. For some reason everybody liked vanilla candles.

EV: Yeah, we had the Chianti bottles of wine that had the straw.

EE: Yeah, yeah.

EV: Those were real popular. You'd buy the candle and they would drip like crazy and had multi layers on it.

EE: Right.

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EV: And you weren't cool if you didn't have that.

EE: But I don't remember where we got all the posters. Was there a store that was just a poster store?

EV: I don't remember anything about that.

EE: We bought posters out there because you know that's what you put up on dorm walls.

EV: Right.

EE: Then Cargo Houston, I know one year I was in charge of freshman week for the college I was in at Rice, and that was an organized trip.

EV: Really?

EE: Oh yeah, the freshman advisors, those of us that were upper classmen, we'd load all of our little freshman group in there, and we'd go out to Westbury Square and, you know, people would buy corkboard to put on their walls because the residential college that I lived in at Rice just had plain brick walls, and it was kind of hard to soften it and people would buy Madras wall hangings.

EV: Oh, that's right, the Madras...

EE: Yeah, Madras was big back about that time, or as my son who lives in India now calls it, Madras. It was Madras to us. Now, the name of the whole city has changed. It's now Chennai.

EV: Do you remember, there's some; did you ever do any dining there? There was apparently, there was an Italian restaurant, maybe a Chinese restaurant that was there.

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EE: I didn't ever do the Chinese restaurant. I vaguely remember there was an Italian restaurant, and there was a... there's no way to describe it; there was a funky clothing store in there, too.

EV: Cromwell; was it Cromwell? Very British, is that what you are talking about?

EE: No, I remember one where they sold all the bell bottom jeans and that kind of stuff.

EV: Oh sure, the tie dyes and the bell bottoms and all the patches.

EE: Right.

EV: When you get a hole in your pants, you just bought a butterfly or flower or something and put it on there.

EE: Of course, now you go out, and you pay to have a hole in your pants.

EV: That's right.

EE: You buy them new that way; I don't understand it.

EV: I could have kept my jeans and sold them for a fortune.

EE: That's right.

EV: You know, I was telling your wife that there's a group out there who wants to restore this place. They are very interested in trying, but no one has a real handle on it. We did a little background check on the owner, and that guy's a pretty shady guy.

EE: Is he the original owner?

EV: I wouldn't say original, but he's one who apparently owns it right now. No, I don't think he is the original owner. The original owner was, I think, was related to the... our opera hall, the opera house downtown.

EE: Wortham?

EV: There's a Wortham name on there somehow, who apparently one of the first individuals who kind of initiated the project, and he hired some architect from somewhere, and they had this little Tuscan-looking place. No, this guy is [Alfred] Antonini from New York, and he's a pretty rough character, apparently. He just came out of the penitentiary for fraud. I don't know what his intentions are.

EE: There are still people that live there, huh?

EV: There's people... I understand there's artists that live up there in the apartments. My understanding is his idea was wanting to sell it or set it up to have artist studios and artist apartments. Like a little artist colony. Two, we also talked about maybe the possibility, he had mentioned or his real estate agent had mentioned that they thought about having these apartments for artists and setting up a little gallery in there, but it's so far off the beaten track I don't think anyone would drive all the way out there just to look at a gallery of artists.

EE: It depends; the problem with it now is the surroundings aren't... nothing against Home Depot, but if you are looking at the back wall of Home Depot that's not exactly scenic. And the neighborhood certainly has gone down over the years. I mean, that's what happens when you put in too many apartment complexes in too small of a space.

EV: Exactly!

EE: Then some of those apartments in the area, they just have allowed them to deteriorate something fierce.

EV: Yeah, I remember when they were building some apartments around the... off of Allen Parkway around Channel 11 somebody was saying, "We're just building tomorrow's

slums out here" because they aren't very well built and they are going to go down...but anyway that's beyond. Do you recall that there were any big sales out there, of having an annual sale that all the stores would have out there?

EE: No.

EV: Okay.

EE: You know, the people that I knew were just... and one thing I've tried to rack my brain, if you ask me I would tell you we used to go out there on Sunday afternoons. But I don't know if blue laws were still in effect.

EV: You know...

EE: If my memory's just faded... I don't know if the stores were open on Sunday afternoon or not, but that was my memory that that was a good time to go out there.

EV: No, I think you're right. I don't think we had the blue laws then. They came in... they were already gone by that time.

EE: Well, I don't know; not all of them. That's what I didn't remember.

EV: The only one I remember, because I guess that must have been a transitional time for that law. Some were closed and some weren't.

EE: Well, I know it was late '70's. I was elected to the legislature in 1978, and it was after that that the automobile dealers were allowed to be open on Sundays.

EV: But they aren't now? Do they have a choice now? Saturdays or Sundays?

EE: Yeah, they have a choice, something like that. It was... but I know in high school, and to a large degree in college, I tended to work on Saturdays so that's why I think I went out there some on Sunday afternoons.

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EV: One thing is everyone keeps talking about that mysterious ice cream parlor, but no one remembers exactly where it was. Do you remember where it was?

EE: Yes.

EV: Was it facing the piazza?

EE: Yeah, it was right, gosh I'm trying to... the main parking lot fronted on... what would that be Willowbend or Bellfort; whatever that is. I'd have to look.

EV: The one running, well, here.

EE: I've got a map over here. Let me look at a Houston map. I always forget what those streets were. But the way, you had the front row of stores and then a little street or something here and then the piazza set back there. Right?

EV: Yeah.

EE: Then another what I would call street, a strolling street this way. Pizza parlor was down here across another little parking lot. Ice cream store sat right there back in that corner.

EV: Let me do my architecture.

EE: Yeah, it fronted on, the whole shopping center fronted on Bellfort.

EV: Let's see, Bellfort was running...

EE: Sort of east.

EV: Houston east and west?

EE: Sort of east/west. But see this, that's what it did; it curved like that. So that always caused me some angst. Then Willowbend went across up here. But, and Chimney Rock also curved, but here is where Westbury Square sits, right there.

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EV: We're talking... let me see, this is the entrance where it said "Westbury Square" over the top, the archway? Do you remember that?

EE: Right.

EV: The main place.

EE: The main parking was down here.

EV: Right.

EE: Now there's, this actually extends out like this. Then there's another parking lot here.

EV: Right.

EE: The pizza was here.

EV: That's supposed to be the fountain?

EE: Right, that's a fountain. This was Cargo Houston.

EV: Right.

EE: Then the ice cream parlor sat right there. But I think later Cargo Houston moved over here.

EV: Really?

EE: I think so. My memory says Cargo Houston...

EV: Yeah, somebody told me this gentleman passed away or something. I think he was the one, and he was apparently a real nice guy. A folksy old grandfather to everybody type of a guy. But he passed away.

EE: These were more dress stores and things up in here; a little jewelry shop and stuff.

Then I want to say the candle shop was back here.

EV: The cool candles?

EE: Yeah.

EV: This was a ... last time I was out there commercially they had a backpacking shop right here and then there was, that flower shop was still there. I was telling your wife when we first saw a terrarium, it became one of the really neat things.

EE: Really? But this is where the ice cream and we were talking earlier. I vaguely remember a burger place being somewhere along here, too. So, the food part was over in here.

EV: Well there's a, as I said, I don't know where these guys are going or how far they are going to get with this wanting to rehabilitate the place but especially with the owner of it now.

EE: Well, you know that's one of those things that you know if it is privately held...

EV: There's nothing you can do.

EE: There's not much you can do. And particularly now with so much of it gone, I can't, Home Depot didn't... I don't know where most of Home Depot is now at that time.

EV: Where it is now?

EE: Right, I know where Home Depot is now but what was there when Westbury Square was there?

EV: Well, I think they took this ice cream parlor place.

EE: Right they took a whole lot more, too.

EV: Right.

EE: What was over there?

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EV: I don't remember it being much beyond this, but I was only there, I don't know, I think I was going to graduate school for much of it. We hit it pretty strong going out there just to stroll the baby and to have some place to go that was different. Then we moved into...I don't know why we quit going out there. I guess it was just a tad too far. Maybe, I thought we were subject to all these other malls opening up and started going to them.

EE: Yeah, I know my senior year at Rice, we probably took the freshman out there again and that would have been the fall of '70, and I don't remember going there much after that.

EV: Yeah, I graduated from school in '71, and we had already quit going out there, I think.

EE: Yeah, that's when I graduated from Rice was '71.

EV: Was it?

EE: I was here for one more year, and then I went to Austin for graduate school. Then I moved back here in '74, and I don't remember going there then.

EV: What did you major in, in Austin? What did you study?

EE: I got my, well at Rice I got a B.A. in economics, and then I went to the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs in Austin.

EV: That's a pretty incredible outfit, isn't it?

EE: It was, and particularly then. LBJ was alive the first semester I was there, so he was there, you know, kind of hanging around the school and that was...

EV: Oh, did he really come by?

EE: Oh yeah, and that was fun.

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EV: Yeah. Well, I think there's some concern, of course, about tearing what's left, tearing it down, but I think there is probably a quandary about what... they keep calling me up and asking, "Do you think we can do this and do that?" I said, "I don't know, I'm not... that's a law that I'm not familiar with."

EE: Well, the reality is I'm not an architect, I'm not a contractor or anything, but I don't remember it being anything special in terms of structure. I mean on the surface, but it's not a whole lot different then, it's a cut above, but like the Renaissance Festival now that they've got up there. You know, they build buildings to look like something else. It wasn't like these... you know, Rice University was built by Italian artists, and Westbury Square was built to look like an Italian village, but I don't think the construction was such that anybody would say, "Oh, we've got to save this magnificent architectural gem." It's got great memories, and it was a cool place to go.

EV: What is there to rehabilitate?

EE: I've never heard anybody in the local historical preservation groups for example say, "This is an example of..." x, y, or z. I think it's just a fond memory that we all have. In fact, we drove out there just a few weeks ago because now our youngest daughter and her husband live on Chimney Rock, and they... they are permanent buildings, but they don't really look like permanent buildings. I mean, it looks pretty temporary in any case.

EV: Like a movie scene where the G.I.'s are moving in to bomb out Italy or something?

EE: Yeah, well yeah. Right, it does almost look like a movie set. You know, like they built the Alamo out in the middle of West Texas to film the movie *The Alamo*. That doesn't make it the Alamo. It just looks like it.

EV: Well there's... I understand maybe 5 or 6 buildings on Main Street that are just surpassed 100 years old. No one's really touched them. We'd like to maybe do an issue on those things. But we don't have enough issues to be able to cover it. But I think it would be interesting to see they are still in use! That's what you are talking about, I guess. You have something there of substance. But an architect did call me about the place and said it was just kind of thrown together. It needs a lot of inside work to rehabilitate it. That's probably going to come as a shock to these folks out here.

EE: Yeah, it was always... I mean that was my impression when it was new. I never looked at it and said, "Oh these are wonderful buildings." But just the concept was nice and pleasant.

EV: The atmosphere was good. Until you got to your car, you thought you were in Tuscany or something, when you drove away to the Dairy Queen! Let me see if I have... is there anything about it that you want to add to it, Judge, that I didn't ask you about?

EE: No. I mean, my main thing is that it was a destination; and it was a destination such, as I said, when I was at Rice people would come there as freshman, "Where's an interesting place to go?" and that's where we'd take them. You look back at it, and you know there wasn't a whole lot there, but at that time Cargo Houston, there weren't those kind of places. I mean, where could you go buy cork board that had been charred to put on your wall? Where else could you go find posters or... and they always had things like a bean bag chair when they were new or little rattan wicker-looking chairs to sit in? Just things you'd put in a dorm room. They weren't expensive.

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EV: That's right, and I think probably when Pier One came into town that pretty much took Cargo Houston out of the picture because there was a Pier One right over here on, just south of the Galleria or something that I used to go to from time to time. But that's where I got my cool candles and stuff after that. Well, Judge, I thank you for your time.

EE: Oh my pleasure. Thank you for doing this. And interestingly enough, while you were talking to Gwen I was upstairs, and I posted on Facebook that I was being interviewed about Westbury Square, and somebody immediately wrote back and said, "You know, I moved here in 1966, too, and I'd forgotten all about it. Thanks for the memories."

EV: You know, the letters I got were incredible. Some of them just were one or two sentences. "I loved the place. Call me, and I'll give you an interview." Another one just gave me pages of memories that they had about the place. It kind of took me by surprise that the people would remember it with such intensity. So I, and I guess like I mentioned to your wife, when we came here Houston was fairly vanilla and there wasn't anything really exciting coming from a place like San Antonio, which was just a beautiful place.

EE: Yeah, and you know, that was a time when you'd go on dates in high school and college, where'd you go? You didn't have a lot of money, but you could go stroll around somewhere and get away.

EV: When did Market Square open up? That was... was that the '70s, the early '70s?

EE: Yeah, that was a little bit later. I never went down there a whole lot, Allen's Landing and Market Square and all of that. Then the other thing, of course, that happened is Lower Westheimer.

EV: That's right.

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EE: For a little while...

GE: That was a lot more into drinking and smoking dope...

EE: It was known for going out for eating and drinking and all of that.

GE: It wasn't quite as innocent.

EE: But then I had transitioned into that age range.

EV: That's a nice word: transition. Not that I got older.

EE: That's right. I'm still transitioning into new age ranges.

EV: I transitioned into 70.

EE: But you know, Market Square went down, too.

EV: Yeah, well after the... I guess I don't want to say, it was kind of the hippie era.

EE: Oh yeah. Kinda? It was! What was it, "The Love Street Light Circus?"

EV: Yeah, the Love Street Light Circus was one of them. I never went in that place. I did go in that one place where you went downstairs into, the Bastille, is that the name of it?

EE: Something like that, yeah.

EV: Then there was a huge dancehall where Diverse Works is. Right down the street from the family courts on San Jacinto, there was an old... the warehouse that used to have the coffee pot on top.

EE: Yeah.

EV: That was a big hangout for... but you know I didn't want to go... I mean, I went down there just because it was Houston, but you know, any place I walked in and started smelling grass, I didn't want to be around. When the bus comes...

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EE: See, the whole Lower Westheimer, Alabama, Richmond. I just heard her say Sand Mountain, you know, was the coffee bar, and they had a guy living upstairs that would come down and play, play his guitar, and that was Jerry Jeff Walker.

EV: Was it, really?

EE: Yeah.

EV: Golly, I didn't know that! Man, if I had known that. Well, I didn't know it then, but I saw Jerry Jeff Walker when he was up at a place in the Heights.

EE: See, I remember being in there one night (and again the tide of Westbury and all that). You know, I played tennis at Bellaire High School. I played number one at Bellaire, and this other kid played number one at Westbury. He was much better than I was. I always tried to avoid him if I could. But then he went to A&M, and I went to Rice, and I went into Sand Mountain one night, and he is in there with a date and I'm in there with a date. You know, we'd just sit there. Then Jerry Jeff comes in to do his performance, and he starts talking about how he had been over to New Orleans recently and had been thrown in jail. He started talking about, "I met this guy so I wrote this song about him." Do you know what song it was?

EV: Don't tell me; are you kidding me!

EE: "Mr. Bojangles!"

EV: "Mr. Bojangles," golly!

EE: So, I'm sitting there, and I am going, "Why didn't I have a tape recorder?"

EV: That would have been priceless! Oh my goodness!

EE: So that's the Lower. And in that whole area it went away, too.

EV: I think the only thing we have left from that era is Michelangelo's, isn't it?

EE: I guess. There was... the big thing down there, we couldn't remember the name... there were two restaurants. One was called Lilian's Maison des Crepes and that was the first...

EV: She made the French crepes.

EE: The first time crepes, particularly me being an original East Texas boy, I had never seen those before. I thought those were great. Then there was another restaurant down the street that looked like it had a tree growing in it.

EV: Los Troncos.

EE: Los Troncos, okay.

EV: Yeah. Then across from Los Troncos was a... or somewhere in that little neighborhood was a very narrow, which was the first, I think the first French restaurant, which had French cooking. It was a long, narrow little place, right just where the curve is around there. Yeah, Los Troncos was a very interesting place.

EE: But anyway, those areas... it could have been. I was in a new age and stage, but I started going there on dates and things instead of gravitating to Westbury Square.

EV: Yeah, well, at some point you can sit through maybe the early 20s and 30s, "Why did he bring me here?" What a great date!

EE: Well, thank you for doing this!

EV: Oh, thank you.

End of Interview