

Texas City / World War II Oral History Project

Audited Transcript

Interviewee: John Quinn

Interviewer: Vivi Hoang

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[0:00]

Vivi Hoang: This is Vivi Hoang. I'm here with John Quinn. We're in the meeting room here at Moore Memorial Public Library in Texas City, Texas. This interview is for an oral history project about Texas City during World War II. Today is April 20, 2012.

Okay. Could you share with me your name and your birthday?

John Quinn: I'm John B. Quinn. Born June 14, 1926.

VH: That makes you—.

JQ: In Texas City.

VH: In Texas City! That makes you how old during the war years, about?

JQ: Eighty-six.

VH: Oh, you're eighty-six now?

JQ: Uh-huh.

VH: Let's see here. So in 1941 that makes you—.

JQ: 1926 is when I was born.

VH: Okay. Let's see. You were—so in 1941, when the war started, you were about fifteen, is that right? Is my math—?

JQ: Yeah, somewhere around that.

VH: Okay. So you were about in high school when it broke out.

JQ: Yes. Mm-hm.

VH: Okay, great. I just wanted to make sure I understood. So you were born here in Texas City?

JQ: Yes. I had five brothers and six sisters and every one of them were born in Texas City.

VH: Where are you in that order? Where are you among your siblings?

JQ: I was the ninth.

VH: Okay. Got it. Let's see here. Were your parents also from Texas City?

JQ: Well, my father came here in 1908. My mother came here in 1915.

VH: What did your father do?

[2:03]

JQ: My father worked on the docks. Also, he worked part-time with the police department as a jailer.

VH: Okay. And your mother?

JQ: My mother did not work.

VH: She was at home.

JQ: She was a housewife.

VH: Okay. So, let's just get to it. How was your family affected by the war?

JQ: Well, just like everybody else, we were very patriotic and we bought bonds when we could and of course, I had several brothers and one was in the Marines and two of them were in the Merchant Marine.

VH: So, you were in high school at the time, is that right?

JQ: Right.

VH: Can you describe what school was like at Texas City High School during that time?

JQ: Well, it was called Wolvin at that time. A three-story brick building on 4th Street and 6th Avenue. And in the rear of the building there was stairs straight up to the third floor (laughs) and that's how we got to the third floor. To me, it was very dangerous. But there wasn't any serious injuries going up and down those stairs.

I had some very favorite teachers. In 1938, my father died on the Texas City docks of a brain hemorrhage and, well, my mother—at that time, there was no Social Security. So my mother had nine children at home. The youngest was four. It was very hard during those times.

I had several teachers that helped me out a great deal. I think they made a pact. They got together and they decided—we had no cafeteria in that school, so there was a little cafeteria, I mean a little shop down, just a few blocks from there. And the principal of the school's mother and father ran it. So these five teachers got together and they said, "All right, here's what we'll do. We'll have John run down to the store at dinnertime and get us our food. And we will buy his food."

Not many people know that here in Texas City. But I was ever so grateful to them for doing that. Otherwise, I would have probably gone hungry.

VH: Wow. How nice of them, to have—.

JQ: That was a wonderful thing.

[5:19]

VH: Did you have any other siblings going to the high school with you at the time?

JQ: Yes, there was two. Two more. See, we were close together, the age groups were close together. And so there was always some in the same school at that time. But my oldest brother was already out of school at that time. He was born in 1912. So you see, my family goes way back.

The best way I like to describe my family was my father was born two years before Custer made his stand. And his father was born five years before the Alamo fell. So you see, three generations goes very far back. And I'm kind of proud of that, that we've lived here in Texas.

VH: Do you remember what subjects you studied when you were in high school and which were your favorite?

JQ: Well, I liked geography especially and there was a teacher, was my favorite and then my art teacher was my favorite. Ms. Davis. She was later Mrs. Winesett. I visited her several times after I got out of school because I liked her so much. Mrs. Kinan was the art teacher and taught English also. She was a very kind person.

VH: How would you get to school?

JQ: I can't—

VH: How would you get to school?

JQ: To?

VH: To school? From home?

JQ: Walked. We had one bus in the school. Mr. Wilson drove it. But they only picked up people out in the Heights and the West End, I mean in the West End and the Heights. Anybody else didn't have liberty to board the bus. And when I was out in the Heights, lived out in the Heights, my sister worked at Clark's department store. She couldn't ride the bus because she was out of school. So I would walk with her from the Heights down to Texas Avenue to Clark's department store so she wouldn't walk alone.

[8:04]

And sometimes people would pick her up. One old gentlemen that had a dairy, he would pick up us most of the time. And we would always tell him thank you. We were just happy to get the ride because I might have been late to school and she might have been late to work if we hadn't gotten the ride.

VH: How long was that walk?

JQ: Well, it was about twenty-two, -three blocks.

VH: How long would it take you to walk it if you had to walk the whole thing?

JQ: Oh, if you walked fast (laughs), well, it would take us about forty-five minutes. So we'd always have to start out early.

VH: I've heard that during that time, during the war, there were so many new people in town that at the high school, they were having to—there were shifts. Can you talk about that?

JQ: Shifts. In the morning and the afternoon. There were shifts. We went to school that way. Now, at that time, there was a military facility here, Camp Kohfeldt. And they were camped out close to West End, where the old ball field was, where the bus barn is now. And in the '41 storm, which was a very bad storm, they had just deactivated and left the area. However, the tents were still up and some of the equipment was still there that they used and it wound up against the ball field and it was a total loss of all of the stuff that was there. The rain was terrible and the water was pretty high.

VH: This was a hurricane that blew in and destroyed—

JQ: Yes. At that time, they did not name the hurricanes. Now, they name them and we go by, well, so-and-so, Hurricane Ike, Camille, and such as that. But then, they didn't have them.

[10:43]

VH: Which shift were you at school? Were you the morning shift or the evening shift?

JQ: Well, at one time, we were in the morning shift and later, we were in the evening shift.

VH: How did they decide?

JQ: I'm not sure about that.

VH: They just told you.

JQ: Yes.

VH: Okay. Can you tell me about what time to what time those two shifts ran?

JQ: It was 8, about 8:15 to noon, and then the others came in at 12:30, a little later, till school was out at 3:30.

VH: So if you were in the morning, you'd leave about lunchtime and the others would come in.

JQ: Right.

VH: Oh, okay. How many classes a day would you have?

JQ: I'm not sure. Did I have? Oh. There was six. But I'm not sure how many the next session had, so.

VH: Back at home, was your family affected by the rationing?

JQ: Well, you know, we had stamps, rationing stamps. We also could buy little war bond stamps that we had a book we could paste them in. And then after the war, you could cash them in. We were a very, very poor family. Since my father had died in 1938 and my mother had nine children at home and she never worked. So all of us had to go to work that was of age and able to go.

I got a job at the Jewel Theater, which was one of the theaters that were here. We had two, the Jewel and the Texas. Later on, the Showboat came. But, you know, most of them were destroyed by the blast and then rebuilt them.

Then another time I sold *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal* and stuff like that. They didn't have many on the racks in the stores, so they contracted us to go and sell these books and that's the way we made our living.

My mother never remarried and so it was very hard.

[13:37]

VH: Where did your family live at that time?

JQ: At that time, we lived at 732 2nd Avenue North.

VH: Can you—

JQ: And then later on, we moved to the Heights on 1st Avenue North in the 2200 block.

VH: When did you move to the Heights?

JQ: In 1942. That was right in the height of the war.

VH: Can you describe those two homes? Can you describe those two homes that you lived in that that time?

JQ: Well, they were very small homes. Both of them were. Had two bedrooms. (Laughs.) In the old house, we had two bedrooms and my mother and father had a bed in the

living room. All of the rest of us children lived in the other two, the girls in one and the boys in the other.

It was cramped, to tell the—to say the least. Sometimes five boys would sleep in the same bed, three this way and two the other way. We didn't have any choice because we were just in a situation where we could not control it.

VH: What led your family to move during the war years to the Heights?

JQ: My—after—well, I would rather not tell this story.

VH: That's all right. We were talking about rationing; how did that affect the food and the cooking at home?

[15:35]

JQ: Well, shoes was our worst thing about it. Getting shoes. And then we got a car and then getting tires for our car was another terrible expense. Wear and tear on the tires, and we were very careful about it. But many things were—sugar and baking needs were rationed and you could just get so much. You had a ration book with the tickets in it and when you bought the food, they'd tear the tickets out and keep them and when you ran out, good luck. (Laughs.) You just couldn't get anymore.

VH: Did the ration books, were they based on how many people were in the family?

JQ: Yes, uh-huh.

VH: What kind of meals were you having at home during that time?

JQ: Well, my mother baked a lot of bread. (Laughs.) A lot of syrup. We ate a lot of syrup. But we always managed to have a full stomach at the end of the meal. It was hard but we managed.

VH: Who did the cooking at home?

JQ: My mother did all of the cooking.

VH: Oh, for everyone?

JQ: My mother and I took in washing. We had two wash pots. I washed the clothes and rinsed them, wrung them out and put them on the line. After that, when they dried, we'd starch them and iron them. My mother and I had two ironing boards and two irons. We would work all day.

It was very cheap at that time. We'd get a nickel for a shirt. Sometimes fifteen cents for a pair of pants. We had to work long hours to make a living that way. But whatever we did, we did it honestly.

[18:01]

VH: You had said that everyone had to work during that time and you had gone to work at the theater and then selling magazines.

JQ: Uh-huh. And then I also got a job at the bowling alley. Every line that the people bowled, you would get three cents a line. That doesn't sound like a lot but I sometimes worked three different alleys (bumps microphone) at the same time, jumping from one alley to another and putting down the pins. So I made a lot more money than the rest of them because I was so agile that I could get from one lane to the other to put up the pins.

VH: I see. Because at that time they didn't have the machines.

JQ: Right. They didn't have the electrical equipment that they have now. You did this by hand and you stuck the pins in a rack and pushed the rack down. It would set up the pins when the rack went back up.

VH: Can you talk about your job at the theater? What did you do there?

JQ: I did the popcorn machine and then at times when (unintelligible), I would take the people down with the flashlight, let them, show them where to be seated.

VH: Would you also watch movies yourself? Did you watch movies yourself?

JQ: Yes, we always got to—after every, the last movie, we'd always get to see the movie free.

VH: Did you have any favorites from that time?

JQ: Oh, I was a movie buff and I knew all of the names and I—they had *Photoplay* and they'd have big pictures of them, colored pictures. I'd cut them out and paste them on the wall and I knew every one of them. But of course over time, I've forgotten them. But that was my pleasure, putting up all my movie stars on my wall.

VH: During the—before the movies, would they play anything related to the war?

JQ: Beg your pardon?

VH: Before the movies, would they play anything related to the war?

JQ: Oh, a great deal of them. Yeah.

VH: Can you talk about that?

JQ: Well, they were just war movies, battles that they fought. As soon as the battle was over, they'd start the movie and it would take time to get to our theaters. But that was one of our main things, to watch the war movies.

VH: Were they war movies, or was it news about the war?

JQ: Every time we went to the movies, they would give the news on the Pathé News, and we'd get all of the news from that.

[21:18]

VH: From your observations working at the theater during war time, how popular was it a pastime for people to go see movies?

JQ: Oh, they were full all the time because if they didn't watch that, they would listen to the radio. Television was new and a great many people didn't get television until much later so the movie or the radio were their main attractions.

VH: That brings up radio; was that something you and your family listened to?

JQ: Oh yes, we had a radio. We also had what you call—I'm not sure what it was—it was a little thing, a crystal, and you could put it together and put earphones and you could hear music or news on that also.

VH: That was different from the radio?

JQ: Yes, that was different from the radio.

VH: Hm, interesting. What would you listen to on the radio?

JQ: "Fibber McGee and Molly." Something like that. "Amos and Andy." There was quite a few comedies. Red Skelton was on and Milton Berle started to go on then.

VH: Do you remember the radio stations you listened to?

JQ: KTRH. From there. They had one in Galveston called KGULF. But there were not very many of them as there are now. Of course, we'd get the ones, the main ones from New York that would be transferred to the television stations in Houston and then we'd get those.

VH: When listening to the radio, was it something your family did together at a specific time?

JQ: We did that together. We'd always listen to it together.

VH: Was it something you did in the evenings, or?

JQ: Yes, in the evenings. We had to work during the day. (Laughs.) Of course, I was working most of the night, too. When the bowling alley closed at midnight, it was too far for me to walk by myself to where I lived out in the Heights, so there was one bus and Mr. Maine drove that bus and you had to get on it at Lucas Café and ride to the Y, which was roads meeting, going to Galveston.

You had to ride it to the Y and then it would come back through La Marque and then come down Texas Avenue. At 21st Street is where I would get off and the bus would come and go to Lucas Café. And that was the last run of the night; there wouldn't be any more until (bumps microphone) the next morning.

[24:40]

VH: Did you ever miss that bus?

JQ: Never did miss that bus. But after a while, I had to slack off because it was so late and I was having so much work at school and at the theater that I kind of slacked off working all the time. That's when my mother and I really started in our little washing and ironing bit.

VH: I forgot to ask: Do you remember how much movie ticket prices were at the theater at that time?

JQ: You could—if you were twelve, you had to pay an (bumps microphone) adult ticket. It was fifteen cents for people younger than twelve and twenty-five cents for those who were over twelve. There was a large number, large number below twelve years old. (Both laugh). They just kind of said, "I'm not twelve yet." So they got in for fifteen cents.

VH: Would your family ever come to see a movie while you were working there?

JQ: No. My mother never did go to the movies. She always thought that she needed the money more for home. We were terribly poor. And that's just one of those things that you go through and you are matter of fact because there's nothing you could do about it. You just had to do the best you could.

[26:43]

VH: We were talking about radio shows earlier. Did you listen to FDR's Fireside Chats?

JQ: Yes, we always listened to those.

VH: Can you talk about why that was something that was important to you to listen to?

JQ: Well, because it not only affected my family, but every family in the nation. We were very proud of FDR. He was doing a wonderful job and it was a sad, sad day, the day he died in Georgia. Then Mr. Truman took over and he did a good job. And they ended the war by bombing Japan.

This was the only way we could have won the war. If we had landed on Japan, it would have been a catastrophe.

VH: I'd like to talk about blackouts.

JQ: Okay.

VH: That was something we had—

JQ: All right. We had to have black curtain over all the windows. And if we heard the siren, then we had to let those black cloths down over the windows. But most of the time we just turned out the lights. We had (laughs)—at that time we had kerosene lamps with the little chimney on them and we'd fill those with kerosene and it had a wick to it and we burnt those.

Then we were lucky enough to get electricity and we had electricity just straight, wire down here. We'd just turn the light on. We thought we were in high cotton whenever we got our electricity. And so it was wonderful thing, wonderful day we got that.

[28:52]

VH: How often did the blackouts happen?

JQ: Well, not very often here in Texas City. But, you know, see, we had all of the plants here. There was quite a few plants. And we were always on the alert because we were a strategic situation here.

VH: Because of that, I've heard that there were coast watchers and things like that.

JQ: Yes.

VH: Can you talk about that?

JQ: Well, I'm not too familiar with the wardens that they had here to do that. But they did wear their little uniform and their hat and they'd come by and tell us what we should do if this happens or what we would do if that happened. So we were always ready for it if anything happened like that, an emergency.

VH: Did your neighborhood have a block captain?

JQ: Not that I know of, no. They would just be anybody that was in that corps. We called it "the corps."

VH: You said during blackouts, you would just turn the lights off?

JQ: Yeah.

VH: But you also had the curtains.

JQ: Yeah, put down the curtains.

[30:25]

VH: If you put down the curtains, could you still have lights on inside the house or did you have to turn those off?

JQ: No, no lights.

VH: No lights. Okay. Let's see here. Did your family have a victory garden?

JQ: Oh yes, we raised gardens. At that time, in 1941, I really don't like to talk about it because I loved everybody. I had a garden. Every—the blacks and the Mexicans had to live on the south side of Texas Avenue. The whites lived on the north side. And it broke my heart to see them having to live down there and not be able to come on this side and live.

I had a garden and I raised hot peppers. So as soon as the peppers got ripe, I would pick them, put them in little bags, and take them down to where the Mexicans lived and they loved the hot peppers. So I sold that to them.

And also we had collard greens and different vegetables in the garden. We sold them.

VH: Where would you sell them? Where would you sell them? Did you sell them—?

JQ: No, not in the stores. We'd take them to the individuals.

VH: Okay. Was the garden something you had before the war already?

[32:10]

JQ: Yes, we already had that. My daddy was big on gardens. And after he died, we just kept it up.

VH: Whose responsibility in the family was it to tend the garden?

JQ: Everybody's. And we also had milk cows. There was a big pasture we put the cows in. Then in daytime, I mean, when it came time to milk them, everyone had their own cows to milk.

VH: How many cows did you have?

JQ: At one time, we had six. I milked three and my older brother milked three and then we'd change off. I taught my younger brothers how to milk a cow and then they helped with it, too.

VH: During the war years, do you remember what kind of chores were assigned to you at home?

JQ: Well, I already told you that I washed and ironed and milked the cows and the garden and that was about a day's work.

VH: Those are long days, yeah.

JQ: Yes it was, yeah. (laughs)

VH: When your family did have time for fun, what kinds of things would your family do?

JQ: Well, we belonged to a church that didn't believe in playing cards, so that was out. They did play Forty-Two and I can't see the difference between Forty-Two and cards. Nevertheless, we had to—we were very strict on some things. But we always listened to the radio and so that's about what we did.

VH: Okay. Let's see. Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

JQ: Yes.

VH: Can you talk about what that—?

JQ: We were getting ready to go to church and we heard it on the radio. Of course, then, the next day, we all went to the assembly and we saw it there, where he, President Roosevelt, had asked for a declaration of war. So that was how we knew that we were in war.

[34:43]

VH: You had said that there was an assembly. So after—

JQ: At the school.

VH: At the school. Oh, there was a school assembly.

JQ: At the school, yes, there was an assembly.

VH: Who at the school gave you the news about the declaration of war? Was it the principal?

JQ: No, we were all instructed to go to the auditorium and we watched it on a film.

VH: Oh, I see. What was running through your mind at that time?

JQ: That it was a very bad thing and I knew that a lot of people were going to have to sacrifice and some of my brothers went to that. Later on, I didn't—I was too young at the time—and then later on, I was in Korea in the Army.

VH: I see. One of the things we've talked about was kind of the division in Texas City of where whites lived in the north of one of the roads and then—

JQ: Texas Avenue.

VH: Texas Avenue. And blacks and Mexicans lived south of that. Do you know how that came to be? Was it just understood, or?

[36:09]

JQ: I don't know whether it was understood or what. It was just a matter of fact. In fact, a black family lived across the street from me who was a wonderful, wonderful family. And they were exceptionally clean and we loved them dearly. We considered them part of our family. And one day they—men came to them and said they were going to have to move on the south side of town.

The day Mr. Barn came to move their house, we all gathered out in the yard and cried. They came over and told us not to worry, that we'd still be part of their family. When they moved over on the south side of Texas Avenue, I'd go over there and visit them. They had two daughters whom I thought a great deal of and up until the time that Mr. and Mrs. Bates died, I always went to see them.

Later on the girls moved to Beaumont and I didn't see much of them but once in a while, they'd come back to see about the house and I'd get to see them.

VH: You had said that we had several plants related to the war effort here in Texas City. We were kind of a strategic location. I've heard that because of those plants, many—there was an influx of people into Texas City.

JQ: Oh, yes. From West Virginia, up in the northern part, they all came down with Carbide and American Oil, got some from up there. It was—our population doubled in a matter of months when all of the plants came in.

[38:20]

VH: How did that doubling of the population affect the city?

JQ: Well, we were happy that we were growing and could do something for the war effort. Lots of people working at the plants every day in shifts, twenty-four hours a day, the plants were working. And they still do that, same thing, producing the necessities that we need.

VH: Did you notice—what other changes did you notice? Was there, for example, more traffic?

JQ: Oh yes, there were. We started—they started building roads, better roads. 9th Avenue at that time only went as far as 14th Street. You had to turn there and go further down before you could go out west. And so finally they cut what's called Palmer Highway now through to the—all the way through to meet the other street. You didn't have to go around. Then when you wanted to go to Galveston, you had to turn on 21st Street and go down to 5th Avenue South and then turn and go back to hit the highway.

So they've done a great deal to do that. The loop was a two-lane road. Not many houses out there at that time. But then they went ahead and started building out there and it is what we call, bayou. Mostly bayou area.

[40:21]

VH: The people who were coming to Texas City, where were they coming from?

JQ: Who?

VH: The people who came to Texas City to work at the plants?

JQ: Oh, different places. Up, West Virginia, Kentucky. All of the, up there in the north.

VH: Okay. Was it, would you say, a diverse group, or was it predominantly white people or people of any particular race?

JQ: No, no, it was diverse.

VH: Okay.

JQ: A great many people came here then.

VH: How did that affect housing in Texas City?

JQ: It was very limited. You really appreciated a place when they—of course, we had our home. But they were really appreciative to just get enough to live there until they could provide some other place to live, bought land and built a house. But every apartment was practically taken and people looking for some place to live.

VH: You've mentioned your family had a car. What kind of car was it?

JQ: It was a Model A Ford. And with a pair of pliers and baling wire, you could make that run. (Laughs.)

VH: Who did the driving in the family?

JQ: My daddy did the driving before he passed away and then my mother learned to drive and she did all the driving.

VH: Were you able to fit the entire family?

JQ: It was pretty tough but we managed.

VH: When the war came, how did that affect your family's driving habits?

JQ: Well, it didn't. It didn't matter; we were still driving when we could.

[42:21]

VH: Was gas rationed?

JQ: Gas was rationed as well as everything else was. I really—we always listened to the news and we had many friends that were killed overseas so we were very sad about that.

VH: I was going to ask about the day that Hiroshima was bombed—do you remember where you were that day?

JQ: I beg your pardon?

VH: The day that Hiroshima was bombed in Japan, do you remember where you were that day and how you heard the news?

JQ: No, I don't remember that, where I was that day. But I thought surely that the war would end then. But later on they had to bomb Nagasaki and that was the end of the war and everybody was glad it was over. But yet we had the war in Europe to finish.

VH: V-J Day—I've heard that V-J Day, was that a big day here in Texas City?

JQ: Oh yes, it was a very big day. Everybody was happy, everybody got out. Nobody kissed anybody (laughs) but they were hugging and it was a good day.

VH: How did people learn of the news?

JQ: Over the radio. Then we were beginning to get television so that was a big thing.

VH: Do you remember any community events related to the war that happened here in Texas City?

[44:13]

JQ: No, I don't believe so. I'm sure there were but I wasn't affected. I was always busy, busy doing work to, so we could buy food. It was an exceptionally hard time for my family.

VH: When the war ended, what kind of feelings went through you and your family?

JQ: Well, a very happy feeling because we knew that my brothers could come home and we could have a complete family again. Of course, we were sad that my father died but I always said, "That's life." (Door opens in background.)

VH: How soon—oh, go ahead.

JQ: We're going to have to wrap it up pretty soon.

VH: Okay, no, let's go ahead and wrap it up. I think that's all the questions I had. Did you have anything else you wanted to add?

JQ: No. No, I don't believe so.

VH: Okay.

[45:21]

