

## **Texas City / World War II Oral History Project**

### **Audited Transcript**

Interviewee: Troy Uzzell

Interviewer: Vivi Hoang

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[0:00]

Vivi Hoang: This is Vivi Hoang. I'm here with Troy Uzzell. We are in the meeting room 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 March 21, 2012.

All right. Mr. Uzzell, could you tell me when's your birthday?

Troy Uzzell: June the 21, 1920.

VH: Okay. 1920. So that makes you now—

TU: Ninety-one years old.

VH: And how old does that make you during the war years?

TU: Oh. I was twenty-one when it started and I was—(unintelligible) in '45—five years later.

VH: Right. So about twenty-one to twenty-six years old. Okay. Um, where were you born?

TU: Alvin.

VH: Alvin.

TU: Way down there.

VH: How and when did you come to Texas City?

TU: Came to Texas City in September of 1939.

VH: And what made you move to Texas City?

TU: I had a job over here, (unintelligible) made an application to have a job over here, so from Alvin, I just came over here, went to work.

VH: Okay, what kind of job was it?

TU: I was timekeeper on a road job, when they was building the road going in to—resurfacing the road going into Galveston.

VH: Okay, was that a job for the state? For the city?

TU: No, the job that I was on was for the contractor that was doing the work for the state.

VH: I see, I see. Okay. So, can you talk a little bit about when you moved here, did you move here by yourself?

TU: Yeah.

VH: Or was that with your family?

TU: No, I was single at the time.

VH: Okay.

TU: But very much in love, so.

VH: Okay, when did you meet Mrs. Uzzell?

TU: Well, this is—my first wife had passed away.

VH: Oh, I see.

TU: That's the one we're talking about now.

VH: I see. Okay.

TU: Okay.

VH: When you moved here in 1939, you know, that's the year—how would you say was the city affected by the war? What kind of, what observations—

TU: Well, I came here before the war. I had a brother lived here. And they was needing a timekeeper when they were building the road from the Causeway—no, no, for the Y to the Causeway. And I went out there as timekeeper for that job. And when that job was over, evidently he liked what I did so he kept me and brought me back to Texas City and then I became his superintendent.

[3:14]

VH: Have you lived in Texas City ever since then?

TU: Yeah, since 19—well, no, went to war. I was in Texas City when I came back. I came back to La Marque because I sold my house and everything and so I came back to La Marque after the war.

VH: Okay. And then, at some point you moved back to Texas City from La Marque?

TU: Huh?

VH: You moved back to Texas City from La Marque?

TU: Yeah. Well, no. My wife—I had a wife and two children. So she was living over—she went to live with her folks over at La Porte. And that's the reason then, when I came back, the company furnished me a house when I came back. We lived in a company house there. The reason (unintelligible) it was the company house I was living in when the blast happened. I was on 3 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue North. So (makes blowing noise) blew every window out, except one half, bottom of the pane.

VH: Oh my goodness.

TU: Every one of them.

VH: I'm told you were in the Navy. Is that right?

TU: Yeah.

VH: From when to when were you in the Navy?

TU: I went in, in '44. Got out in '46.

[4:51]

VH: All right. Okay. I'd like to talk a little bit about what Texas City was like from '39 to '44.

TU: Yeah, okay. Man, it was—downtown was downtown. Texas City 6<sup>th</sup> Street was busy. All the main—well, and Texas Avenue, too. She's been here longer than I have. (Points to wife.) Texas Avenue and 6<sup>th</sup> Street was hubba hubba hubba. It was really active. Biggest department store was on Texas Avenue, down there on, it'd be about 4<sup>th</sup>, I guess, 4<sup>th</sup> Street and Texas Avenue. It was Clark's department store.

VH: What were you—

TU: (Gestures to wife, Gwen Atwood Uzzell.) Now, she came here before I did.

VH: And I will definitely be asking her similar questions.

TU: (Laughing.) Okay.

VH: How was the city—when the war started, what effect did it have on the city?

TU: On the city?

VH: Uh-huh.

TU: Oh, everybody was gung ho. I mean, everybody was decided and everybody had the war effort—first thing in everybody's heart was the war effort. I'm not just talking about Texas City; the country as a whole, now, they was behind everybody; every soldiers, sailors—they were right behind you.

VH: Can you give me some examples of what you saw in Texas City of how people—

TU: Oh. Yeah, 6<sup>th</sup> Street was busy, busy, busy. It was all the main—it had two streets, Texas Avenue from the dike down—not the dike, but where the water is—up to 6<sup>th</sup> Street. They had all kinds of businesses on there.

[6:58]

VH: When you say it was busy, in what way—can you explain what you mean, how that was related to the war effort?

TU: Well, uh, Monsanto came in during the war effort. Carbide was here. American Oil was here. Republic was here. And (asking wife) what was Texas City Refinery called, back in that, that long ago? What—it's Texas City Refinery now. But they was all here when I came here. So Texas City was, uh, had a good port for employment. This was a good place to come.

VH: The defense contracts—

TU: Oh yeah, a lot of people, a lot of people. And so all—industrial town, that's what it was. Sixth Street was—and Texas Avenue, from Sixth Street to the docks, uh, dike down there. Man, it was all department stores and businesses. So it was busy. 9<sup>th</sup>, well, to about 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue, back to Texas, man, it was just hubba hubba hubba.

VH: I've heard there was rationing going on. Was that something that—

TU: That's before—well, there wasn't rationing until the war came on. But before the war, there wasn't any rationing, of course.

VH: Right. During the war. Can you talk a little about—

TU: Okay, now I'm back with you on the rationing, okay. What all was rationed (turns to wife)—gosh, do you remember what all was rationed?

Gwen Atwood Uzzell: About everything.

TU: Yeah, about everything. I'm trying to think how the system worked. You could get you, uh, things to eat.

GAU: You had coupon books. You got so many coupon books for the members in your family.

TU: Yeah.

VH: Could you talk a little bit about—

GAU: For food.

[9:22]

VH: Okay—I'm going to just, since I have microphones on, I'm going to interview Mrs. Uzzell, but it's easier for me to do it separately.

TU: Okay.

VH: Could you talk a little bit about the coupon books?

TU: Coupon books? Yeah, you had to have—everything was rationed and so people that was in the industrial part of war effort had a higher priority than just a guy that worked (bumps microphone, which makes a blowing noise)—you know, somebody that wasn't involved in the war effort. They had priorities for certain things that you could get and couldn't get. And that's the way it was. (Laughs.)

VH: So you got coupon books as well?

TU: Huh?

VH: You got coupon books as well? You got the coupon books?

TU: Oh yeah, before the war, yeah.

VH: Where did you go to get them?

TU: Where did I what?

VH: Where did you go to get them?

TU: Everybody had them.

VH: Did they mail it to you?

TU: No, what about those (turns to wife)—they gave us rights, to buy certain things? She can probably tell you more about that than I can.

VH: Okay, I'll ask Mrs. Uzzell—

TU: Let me pull her up a chair to—

VH: Oh, no, no, no, I'm sorry, it's simpler for me to, it's easier if we do it one at a time.

TU: Okay.

VH: Okay. So if food was rationed, if everything was rationed, how did that affect your day-to-day life?

TU: (Laughs.) When everything you got to—car, couldn't buy a car. And everything was rationed and you had to protect your rights. Everybody was wanting to get coupons so they could get the rationing and yeah, it was a well-organized—but I'll say this much: It was well organized. (Turns to wife.) Didn't you think so too, honey? People didn't suffer.

You didn't get things that you would like to have, but we didn't suffer. That's the difference. So we always had plenty to eat and all this kind of thing. It may not be all that you wanted to, kinds of food that you would want me to get, but we didn't go hungry.

[11:49]

VH: Did you family have to make adjustments in—

TU: Oh yeah, you had—everything was rationed. Meats, for example, were rationed. (Turns to wife.) What all was rationed back in those times? Nearly everything. Yes, you had a coupon that you could give them. They gave you coupons that you had to buy certain things but you had to pay the money and then give them the coupon for what you was purchasing. That's the way it worked.

VH: Did Texas City have blackouts and dimouts?

TU: Oh yeah, yeah.

VH: Tell me a little bit about them.

TU: Well, 'course, being in Texas City, in the plant, we didn't—they couldn't have the lights at night like they used to. But we did have lights at night. Because I remember working down at Monsanto during the war, and we had to work around the clock, twenty-four hours. And I worked those twenty-four, not—I worked the shift—I was working for a contractor that had heavy equipment like cranes, and trucks and this type of things. And so I was, I worked a lot of long, long hours during those times.

I didn't have anybody else to relieve me so sometimes I'd be down there at three o'clock in the morning and eleven o'clock at night—just whatever it took. I wasn't the only person who did these things. This—you know, when I went in the war, that was—whoo, it gave me a little breathing room, you know, I never had anyone. I was out here trying to get everybody satisfied.

It was quite a contrast to when the war came along and everything was rationed. I don't know if you know that or not, but it was rationed. Milk, and bread and all that stuff, was rationed. You could only get so much of it.

[14:15]

VH: Did you have drills to do blackouts and dimouts?

TU: Did I have what?

VH: Were there drills—

TU: Drills?

VH: —for blackouts and dimouts?

TU: Well the siren would blow if you had to blackout. And we used the siren, everybody that just blacked the house out.

VH: Did you have a blackout curtains?

TU: Oh yes, we had—some of them did, some of them didn't. Ones that didn't, couldn't turn the lights on. Turn the lights on if you had so it didn't show up from outside.

VH: Did your home have blackout curtains?

TU: Yeah, oh yeah, yeah. We had curtains. Mm-hm, in black.

[15:02]

VH: Did your family have a victory garden?

TU: (Breathes out.) No. No.

VH: Where did you get your news from?

TU: Huh?

VH: Where did you—how did you get news during that time?

TU: How did I get—?

VH: News?

TU: Used to?

VH: News? Like a newspaper?

TU: Oh, newspaper?

VH: Right. How did you get news about the war?

TU: Oh, well, we had the daily paper.

VH: Which paper was it?

TU: *Chronicle*.

VH: The *Houston Chronicle*?

TU: Yeah. The *Houston Chronicle*. That's what I had.

VH: How about the radio. Did you listen to the radio?

TU: The what?

VH: The radio?

TU: Radio? Oh yeah, yeah. Well, that's what you lived by. Didn't have television. Yeah, you had to go everything by radio.

VH: What kinds of things did you listen to on the radio?

[16:01]

TU: (Laughs.) Well, I had—my daddy, he was a fiddle player. And his daddy was a fiddle player. So I grew up around fiddle playing. And so I always liked to hear the fiddles playing. I didn't play but he and his daddy, both were champion fiddle players. That's what I grew up with. I enjoy fiddle playing to this day. But anyway that's just a little background about our times. Of course, I was living in Alvin at that time.

I was born and raised in Alvin. Came over here in 1939. Went to work for T.A. Newman. He was a contractor that was, used to be from Manvel. My brother was a barber over here and he found out about a job that was going to be open when they were building a road (bumps microphone) from the Y to Galveston Causeway. And I went to work on that project as a timekeeper. When that job, we completed it, well, I came back to Texas City and kept on working. He wanted, thought enough of me to keep me, so I finally became superintendent foreman. War came along and everything changed when the war came along.

[18:00]

VH: How did things change?

TU: Well, I had—I was superintendent for this contractor, T.A. Newman, and we had over a hundred employees and that many trucks; had twenty-five cranes and a hundred trucks. So that's about a hundred and twenty-five or thirty men, forty men, whatever, and—but I was over them, superintendent for that. I grew up in the business so I knew it. I hired in as a timekeeper and then when that job quit, got through with it, well, he

brought me back to Texas City and I stayed on. And finally I was superintendent for him; manager for him, really.

VH: Do you remember there being any special events in Texas City during the war?

TU: During the war? Well, yeah—well, no, the blast came after the war. They had—I'll have to give you a little background here. When Monsanto was built, I was superintendent for a contractor that furnished cranes and trucks. That's what they furnished. Cranes, you know what I'm talking about, with the boom and all that? I was superintendent for that. They built Monsanto during the war and that was built on a hydraulic field. A hydraulic field is where they go out, water, cut underneath it and pump it up on dry land and let the water run off and elevate your land up. That's what Monsanto was bailed on.

[20:14]

And Texas City, Carbide, Amoco Oil, and most of (turns to wife)—honey, what's the name of the—now out here, where Amoco, I mean, (pats his leg a few times) where Velasco is? What was the name of that? Texas City Refinery, wasn't it?

GAU: (Unintelligible.)

TU: Anyway.

GAU: Strange names (unintelligible).

TU: Like I say, I was superintendent for the biggest contractor in Texas City.

VH: I wanted to ask you about how the community participated in the war effort. Were there any—do you know of any coast watchers?

TU: There was a what?

VH: Were there any coast watchers during that time?

TU: Coast?

VH: Coast watchers?

TU: Oh, lordy, yes. Yeah, you had to have permission to go everywhere you went. You just couldn't go out deep seaing. You couldn't do that without permission.

[21:22]

VH: I'm told there were people who would watch the coast—

TU: Oh, yes.

VH: —for submarines.

TU: Sure.

VH: Did you know anyone who did that?

TU: Well, I been out there when a submarine was supposed to be there. 'Course, that's when I was in the Navy. I didn't go to the Navy—I had a high-priority job.

VH: In the Navy?

TU: No, before the Navy, to stay out of the military. My job was a key job. I was superintendent for this contractor; we had over a hundred trucks and twenty-five cranes and lifts. So we was big time. But I was the right age and finally my—and I had a wife and two kids when I went to war. So I got exempt for the job capacity that I had. Made me exempt to go over to war. And it was—so I didn't go into the war until the early part of '44.

VH: Were you drafted?

TU: Yes, uh-huh. Yeah. I was drafted. But I had a high priority to not being drafted. That's the reason I stayed out so long as I did. They rated you by what position you had and the importance of what you had to do and my job was a high-priority job. So consequently—I never did try not to go. 'Course I was married and had two kids, I didn't (unintelligible)—first thing, I didn't want go over and get shot (laughs) if I didn't have to, of course. But I never doubt that, I never even thought about that. I only thought about doing the best that I could for the war effort.

[23:21]

VH: Where in Texas City did your family live during that time?

TU: Lived on 3 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue North.

VH: Can you describe what your neighborhood looked like?

TU: Huh?

VH: Can you describe your neighborhood, what it looked like?

TU: Oh yeah. Well, Texas City was pretty well—(gestures to wife) she came here before I did.

VH: And I'll definitely be asking Mrs. Uzzell about it.

TU: But I came here in '39. And, let's see, apartment right behind the bank up here in '39 when I first came over here. I got married when I first came over here. Both my kids were born in Texas City, both my children.

VH: Were there block captains in your neighborhood?

TU: Huh?

VH: Were there block captains in your neighborhood?

TU: In Texas City?

VH: In Texas City.

TU: No, I don't think so. There could have been. Gosh, I don't think so.

VH: Okay. What about coast watchers?

TU: Oh yeah, oh yeah. You had lots of those.

[24:47]

VH: Oh, tell me a little bit about them.

TU: Well, some of them went out in boats. You had shore watchers, too. But we had also volunteers. And, so, yeah, it was—shouldn't say it was all volunteers. Of course, there was some military here, too, at times, because Texas City, you know, all the refineries here had to be protected. They had adequate protection for—'course, coming in off the ocean over there, they had all kinds of ships out there, intercepting anything coming in there. We didn't have anything flying over from countries that we was at war with. Couldn't fly over, they couldn't have the—they didn't have the capacity to do things like they do now, of course.

[25:55]

I can remember the first—no, I'd better not say that. Started saying I can remember the first aircraft carrier I've seen but I can't remember.

When I was in the Navy, I was on the transport that carried troops and we had enough firepower that we could run by ourselves. Fast enough that we could run by ourselves. There was a lot of ships when the war first broke out that could only make like four knots, five knots, six knots an hour. And then they had to have, when the war got out, that's the first thing: They got escorts to get around these ship that were so slow that would bring things in and out so that they could protect them from Germans coming over here. And of course, over here with Japan on this side.

VH: Do you remember where you were the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor?

TU: Oh gosh, yeah, yeah. Everybody, boy, remembers that one, Pearl Harbor. That got everybody's attention, really.

VH: What was running through your mind that day? Where were you?

TU: I was, whoo, let me think where I was. I was superintendent for T.A. Newman. And I was—I can't remember where I was. But everybody immediately was on the defense for our country. Immediately. You couldn't be more proud of anybody. Everybody wanted to go fight. That's just the way it was. Of course, you had—it depended on where—I was married and had two children when the war broke out. So that gave me priority not to go, you know. The single people: "Oh, let's go, go for it." I did.

But finally, when the war broke out, Texas City was the war effort's place. Everything that Texas City had that's in the refinery business went to the war effort. Everything. They built the first tin smelter in the United States in Texas City. You make it so we need tin during the war. So it's built over there, right over—you know where the tin smelter is?

VH: Vaguely, vaguely.

TU: Right behind Carbide on that next corner over.

VH: Okay.

TU: They built that during the war. And it's the only tin smelter in the Western Hemisphere at that time. But there wasn't any tin, so they had to build a place to make tin. That's a little history for you. (Laughs.)

[29:22]

VH: You said you were in the Navy from '44 to '46, is that right?

TU: Yeah.

VH: Okay. What reaction do you—

TU: I wasn't, see, you had to have a priority. I had a high priority job through the war. That's—I had two children, of course, that made a difference, too, but, uh, finally they got down pretty low for me, so I went in to war, so. But I wasn't twenty-four if I was a day when I went to war. That was a relief. Finally got to sleep. (Laughs.) Oh, lord.

VH: Before, while you were living in Texas City, what kinds of things did you and your family do for fun?

TU: For fun? Theaters. We had two theaters. Texas—well, they had one on Texas Avenue. That's on about 2<sup>nd</sup> Street and Texas Avenue; there was a theater there. And uh, everybody went to it. Golly, everybody went to it. (Gestures to wife.) She went to it. That was before we got married. Then they built another theater here, so we had two theaters. But that was after the war. We only had one during the war.

The Texas Avenue was, really, the main street, nearly. All the biggest grocery stores on Texas Avenue, the biggest hardware store was on Texas Avenue. Clothing, the biggest clothing store was on Texas Avenue.

[31:19]

VH: At the theater that you went to, did they play any war reels? Any—

TU: Did they what?

VH: Did the theater that your family went to, did they play any war reels? Anything related to the war?

TU: Oh yeah. No. Yeah, I remember they did, too. Yeah. Everything (bumps microphone) pertained to the war. Everybody was wanting to go to war. I had a high priority job. I was a superintendent for people that had the cranes, the trucks, and that meant priority to build the plants and do all that kind of stuff. And I was superintendent for them. So I had a high priority not to be enlisted. And of course I had a family, too, a wife and two kids. So, well, one [child], to start with, then during the war, we had our second child. But I did more for the war effort when I was living here than I did after I got in the war.

VH: What makes you say that?

[32:42]

TU: Well, I worked around the clock. I had—oh lordy, I must have had at least two hundred employees under me. Contractors for the trucking and the cranes and all that

stuff. I was the main key to that whole organization. I was young. 'Course I had—now, I never did try to stay out of the war but my priority—for the job priority, what I was doing, was real up there, real high. So consequently my age was just right to go but my job priority—now, I never did not try to go, never did once do that. But my priority was the job-job, was so high that they—I didn't go 'til '44.

VH: Did your family ever buy any war bonds?

TU: Oh yeah. Everybody bought war bonds.

VH: Tell me a little bit about that.

TU: Well, you didn't have anything to spend your money for. You know, clothes and all that kind of stuff, that's just the necessities of life. It all went to producing to make for the people that's here. There wasn't any extras of anything. You had a tight schedule of what you could buy and where you could go. You know, you had gasoline. 'Course, you couldn't go down and fill up your tank. It was—what did you call that? (Asks wife.) Oh, goodness.

VH: Did your—

TU: Everything was—

GAU: Rationed.

TU: Rationed. That's the word I'm looking for. Everything was rationed. You had coupons. They gave you coupons for your gasoline and all that stuff.

[34:50]

VH: You said your family did okay with the rationing. How did you economize? How did you save?

TU: (Laughs.) Because there wasn't anything else to do but work. That's true. We did not have any side things to do at all. So we just couldn't get gasoline to do those things, either.

VH: Did you have a car?

TU: Oh yeah, had a car. I had a company car.

VH: But gasoline was rationed.

TU: Well, yeah, but we didn't have any problem. Of course, we had the refineries here. Three refineries here at that time for gasoline. So we was really producing. And, uh, (breathes out) okay.

VH: Okay, let's see here. I think those are all my questions. Is there anything else you want to add about what life was like during the war here?

TU: For—about the war, or what?

VH: About what was life was like here in Texas City during the war.

TU: Oh. Texas City. 6<sup>th</sup> Street and Texas Avenue, from 6<sup>th</sup> Street to the dikes, was—that was the mainstay. There was a lot—there wasn't as much—the big three-story building there on—(to wife) what's the name of that building, that three-story building there on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 6<sup>th</sup> Street?

GAU: The Mainland Building.

TU: Huh?

GAU: Still there.

TU: Yeah. And, uh, she came here before I did (points to wife).

VH: Yes, and I'll definitely be asking her about that. Okay.

TU: She was my childhood sweetheart. She moved over to Texas City. She married somebody else. I married somebody else. We both lost a spouse and got back together.

VH: How long—

TU: Didn't I do good?

VH: You did great, sir. Thank you so much.

TU: Okay.

VH: I'm going to go ahead and turn this off.

[37:18]