DAVID S. PETTUS

August 3, 1939- August 10, 2004

Michael J. Bailey

David died August 10, 2004, after a fall in the family home in Houston which he grew up. He was not only a gentleman but an unassuming gentle man who left kind memories with all who knew him. David's hearty laugh and pleasant, easy-going personality won him many friends everywhere he visited and volunteered. He was born and raised in Houston the eldest son of a working class family. After a stint in the United States Navy, where he was deployed for the Cuban Missile Crises in the early sixties, he returned to Houston and completed his college education eventually earning a master's degree in geology.

One of his first jobs, as a geologist, was with NASA in Houston. There he worked in the lab processing materials. He was one of the first people to work with materials brought back from the moon landings of the Apollo missions. Later he worked for Phillips Petroleum doing various jobs in the oil industry.

It was in his later years that his love of history brought him into contact with people involved in the pursuit of knowledge of the past. Although he lived in Houston, Dave made trips all over Texas collecting information and researching records for the various projects he had taken upon himself. Dave assisted with many projects such as creating an index for the Perry Papers, helping to teach in summer archaeology programs, and visiting other libraries to make copies of materials related not only to his work but to that of friends and the various organizations that were lucky enough to have his involvement. At the Brazoria County Historical Museum he was very active in the Museum's oral history program, having conducted about 60 interviews since his first one in June of 2003.

His dedication to historical research and to the projects he was involved in won him respect among those who knew and worked with him. The many organizations he was involved with were lucky to have a member who took an active part in activities that enhanced their missions. Upon his death his family made sure that many of those organizations received materials that David collected during his research. Nine truck loads of books were doled out to various museums and libraries. A large amount of his research notes and computer generated items are now housed at the Brazoria County Historical Museum in Angleton, Texas. These materials will be available to other researchers for their benefit and as a fitting memorial to David.

Organizations David belonged to:

Librarian; Houston Archeological Society
Archivist; The Jean Lafitte Society, Galveston, TX
Researcher and Volunteer; Brazoria County Historical Museum, Angleton, TX
Researcher; San Jacinto Battlefield Monument
Researcher; Texas Room Houston Public Library
Member; Archivist of the Houston Area
Member; Museum of Fine Arts Houston
Member; Houston Gem and Mineral Society
Member; Texas Association of Museums
Member; Brazosport Archaeology Society
Tom Brokaw published a book in 1998 entitled The Greatest Generation in which he identified the generation that grew up in the Great Depression and came of age in World War II as “the greatest generation.” I have been privileged through the Brazoria County Historical Museum’s Oral History Program to meet many members of that generation as well as their predecessor generation. The oral history interviews with these individuals have been among the most interesting experiences of my life. It is one thing to read of those now long-past events and times or to see them on the History Channel, but it has much more impact hearing it from the people who live through them.

Through the oral history interviews I have conducted, you can hear about life in Brazoria County before paved roads were common, when many children were in one-room schools, and the Democrat Party ran everything in the county. The Great Depression of the 1930s was as difficult in Brazoria County as elsewhere, and through oral history you can begin to see how people coped with the hard times. If you needed some money to add a few amenities to life, you could trap skunks, raccoons, squirrels, or other fur bearing animals and then sell the fur to Sears, Roebuck & Co. Skunks brought the best price, but had their own problems for the trapper. Women could get employment in the fig and pear canneries in Angleton, Alvin and Pearland. Freeport Sulphur Co. provided jobs for county residents as well as supported home gardens and home canning kitchens for employees and their families. Rice farming was a major agricultural business. Cattle were grazed on open range and gathered in annual roundups at Rosharon. The Agricultural Experiment Station at Angleton was a world-class facility for research on figs and cattle diseases.

World War II was the second major influence on Brokaw’s Greatest Generation and interviews from veterans are fascinating to hear and read. County residents were at the Normandy invasion, The Battle of the Bulge, Anzio, the invasion of Southern France, aircrews on B-17s bombing Germany, stationed in the Aleutian Islands, in northern Italy, and aboard ships in the Pacific c. Civilian contributions to the war effort are also to be found in the interviews. Learn how the Dow Freeport operations provided the raw materials for synthetic rubber used to make tires for the military.
One civilian worker now living in Angleton was present at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. His account of the Japanese attack and subsequent salvage of ships sunk in the attack is unique. Have you heard of German prisoners of war in Angleton? Some of them worked on farms in the Angleton area. One farmer’s son later met one of these prisoners in England after the war. After interviewing about fifty of the World War II generation, I have concluded that they are a distinct group: less self-absorbed than later generations, more focused on getting the job done, and with a better idea of what life is about.

They were the foot soldiers of World War II and people who created the world we have lived in for the past 50 or so years. Those of us who are younger could learn a lot from them if we would only take the time. They, themselves, do not seem to subscribe to the “greatest generation” idea. They were just doing what needed to be done to survive and get ahead.

Those of us in the subsequent generations have not had our say yet, although we think we are pretty great, too. The members of the “in-between generation,” those who were too young for World War II, had our own challenges. We were the foot soldiers in the Korean War and the Cold War. The members of the Baby Boom generation were the foot soldiers in Vietnam, and their children were in Desert Storm and the Iraq War. If these veterans do not talk about their experiences, their children and grandchildren are unlikely to understand exactly what they face in their future.

The Brazoria County Historical Museum can be contacted by anyone interested in giving an oral history interview or helping by being an interviewer. The Museum is interested in hearing from all residents, whether or not you were in the military. Accounts of life in the county are very useful for students of local history. We want to know your experiences. How did you come to live in Brazoria? County? Where have you worked? Did you see the Surfside whale(s)? Have you endured a major storm? Let us know about your life...we care. (The Window Pane, September, 2004)