ORAL MEMOIR EXCERPTS

OF

HARLON M. FENTRESS

A Series of Interviews
Conducted 18 June–19 July 1974

Waco and McLennan County Project

Baylor University
Institute for Oral History

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INTERVIEW HISTORIES

TERMS OF AGREEMENT:
All interviews with Harlon M. Fentress are unrestricted. The contract and tape disposal forms were signed on May 7, 1975.

FENTRESS INTERVIEW NO. 1

INTERVIEWER:
Thomas L. Charlton, Ph.D., Director
Program for Oral History
Baylor University
Waco, Texas

SETTING OF INTERVIEW:
Place—Mr. Fentress' office at Newspapers, Inc.,
900 Franklin Avenue, Waco, Texas
Date--June 18, 1974
Length of tape—one (1) hour and fifteen (15) minutes

TRANSCRIBING AND EDITING:
Transcribing--Mrs. Adelaide Darling, Secretary/Transcriber
Editing--Sent to interviewee on June 28, 1974 and returned in edited form on September 5, 1974
Staff Editing--Garry Ross, Graduate Assistant
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Mrs. Margaret L. S. Miller, Editor/Secretary
Typing in final form--Miss Suzanne Jeter and Ms. Pamela Mace, Student Assistant
Indexing--Lynn Campbell and Mrs. Margaret L. S. Miller

FENTRESS INTERVIEW NO. 2

INTERVIEWER:
Thomas L. Charlton

SETTING OF INTERVIEW:
Place--900 Franklin Avenue, Waco, Texas
Date--June 24, 1974
Length of tape--two (2) hours
TRANSCRIBING AND EDITING:
Transcribing--Mrs. Adelaide Darling
Editing--Sent to interviewee on August 5, 1974 and
returned in edited form on September 5, 1974
Staff Editing--Ms. Pamela Mace
Lynn Campbell
Miss Suzanne Jeter
Mrs. Adelaide Darling
Mrs. Margaret L. S. Miller
Typing in final form--Ms. Pamela Mace
Indexing--Lynn Campbell and Mrs. Margaret L. S. Miller
She and Father both sang in the choir in this little church there in Norwalk.

CHARLTON: Where they had met.

FENTRESS: Um-hum, probably. Mother at that time was clerking in a drug store.

CHARLTON: So your family then, in these various communities where you lived, generally belonged to the Baptist church in the community.

FENTRESS: Yes. That is, my immediate family.

CHARLTON: Yes.

FENTRESS: I couldn't tell you about the rest of 'em.

CHARLTON: Did you have then, a typical Baptist childhood; belonging to the Sunday School and participating in the various church organizations?

FENTRESS: Just Sunday School. I don't--I probably went to BYPU many times but beyond that I was not active.

CHARLTON: When you came to Waco in 1917, I believe it was, the United States was not yet in wartime--

FENTRESS: No.

CHARLTON: --it appeared that war was imminent for the United States. Since 1914, hostilities in Europe had caused great concern throughout the world. What do you remember about Waco as your family moved into town?

FENTRESS: Quite a bit. There was formed out at the high school here, a cadet corps, in which I participated. Camp MacArthur at that time--well, it was in the process of construction. My first summer money
was made on a construction crew out at Camp MacArthur.

CHARLTON: That would have been the summer of 1917.
FENTRESS: That was also the year of the influenza epidemic that cleaned out so many of them and small wonder.

CHARLTON: Did you witness much of that tragedy?
FENTRESS: Yeah, quite a bit.

CHARLTON: How much impact did it have upon Waco, in general, would you say?
FENTRESS: The epidemic?
CHARLTON: Yes.

FENTRESS: Well, it was pretty severe I think. Of course they corrected the situation as soon as they possibly could and those who did not survive were soon replaced by others from Wisconsin and Michigan and places like that. But that was really the town's first prosperity, you might say. It had been a very sleepy town.

CHARLTON: What evidences of new life in Waco came from Camp MacArthur?
FENTRESS: Well.

CHARLTON: How did it change the town other than bringing government money into the town?
FENTRESS: Well I think the complexion of the entire population was changed by the influx of Yankees, so to speak. Many of them stayed here or returned here after the war. I think it was good for the town. There was much less bigotry and more toleration of outlanders, so to speak.

CHARLTON: So it lessened the provincialism of Waco?
FENTRESS: Somewhat, yeah. And that's happened in succeeding years as we've had other military installations here. Air Force and so on.

CHARLTON: Would you say then that this was the beginning of the modern period in Waco history?

FENTRESS: I think you might say that, yes. It may not have been a huge beginning but it was a beginning.

CHARLTON: In what other ways would you describe the town of Waco as you found it with your family when you moved in?

FENTRESS: Well, of course Waco was not as large a city as Des Moines and there was that noticeable difference.

CHARLTON: Was this a let-down to you as a boy?

FENTRESS: No, not at all. In fact, I had to fight my battles all over again because I was a "damned Yankee." And I was the butt of a good many practical jokes. But after a while that subsided. Some of the best friends I ever had were the boys I met here.

CHARLTON: You were going to describe the town as a town smaller than Des Moines.

FENTRESS: Oh, yes. Waco then was probably—I guess between thirty and forty thousand whereas Des Moines was about a hundred thousand.

CHARLTON: What do you remember about the great emphasis on the cotton business when you moved to town?

FENTRESS: Well, of course, it was very noticeable but it wasn't too long after we arrived here that the old one mule crop began to disappear. That is, corn and cotton. That's all they raised around here. There were no small grains. The land was not being put to its best use.
There was a great deal of run-off from heavy rains, and most of the black soil that they had here—this was once a cotton center, as you know—and just simply eroded to the point where it wouldn't produce cotton any more. And as the old custom was, as fast as they'd wear out one farm they'd move to another one. They didn't know anything about terracing or soil conservation or anything of that nature.

CHARLTON: The article written in the local paper after your father's death, credited your father with having brought the first cotton classer from Texas A & M to Waco—

FENTRESS: We had none then.

CHARLTON: --a year or so after the family moved to town.

FENTRESS: That's right. We had no way of grading cotton, it was simply an open market and the buyer took his own chances.

CHARLTON: What made your father enter into this situation and seek to bring another person into the community?

FENTRESS: I think it was due largely to his own agricultural background. It wasn't only the cotton classer that he was interested in getting but in improved practises of farming. Contour plowing, terracing and so on. And I think he was one of the first to advocate the first forms of soil conservation. He, together with, oh, perhaps a half dozen others, could see the handwriting on the wall.

CHARLTON: Did he and Mr. Marsh devote much space in the local press to such subjects?

FENTRESS: Yes, however it was largely at Father's instigation that that was done. Marsh, in the meantime was busy hunting newspapers.