

## Mr. E. G. Boykins and Bridge Street (1920s-1940s)

Excerpts from [\*Oral Memoirs of Edythe B. Heslip and Marjorie B. Pryor.\*](#)  
(click on title for full text of the interview transcript)

Edythe B. Heslip and Marjorie Pryor were the nieces of E. G. Boykins, who owned a funeral home on Bridge Street from the 1920s to 1940s.

Interviewed by Vivienne Malone-Mayes on August 4, 1990, in Waco, Texas

**Malone-Mayes:** . . . Mr. Boykins appears many times in many interviews whenever you begin with Bridge Street because he had a funeral home on Bridge Street, and this was one of the most outstanding and most well-known businesses and most long enduring businesses in the city in terms of the funeral home business. First, I'd like for you to know what relationship they were to Mr. Boykins. What was your relationship? They are both sisters so they had the same relationship.

**Heslip:** E. G. Boykins, which stands for Euwart Gladstone Boykins, was my uncle by marriage. He was married to my father's sister, Mrs. Pauline Boykins. . . . [M]y father lived in a little town called Coalgate, Oklahoma, and our mother died when I was five and my sister was seven. We stayed there with our grandmother until we became ten or eleven and when she had a stroke. The school in this little town did not have a high school. Students would have to ride the bus to Atoka, Oklahoma, to go to high school. Our father was working, and he did not want us to ride the bus because we may get home before he could. And so his sister asked him to send us to Texas. He decided to send us to his sister, Mrs. Boykins. Mrs. Pauline Boykins and her husband had never been able to bear children, but had always had a love and a desire for children. And so they took us in. And that's how we came to Waco, Texas. . . . They wanted to adopt us, but our father never would give them that privilege. He would not give us up for adoption, so we just sort of lived with them and they claimed us as their own, you know.

**Malone-Mayes:** Right, and so that means that you did have firsthand observation of many things that took place in the Boykins family. . . . [Y]ou probably have heard him tell stories of his childhood and how he became involved in the funeral home business.

**Heslip:** He was playing ball at one of the neighborhood places, like all boys will get out and play ball and a Phillips Funeral Home attendant stopped him and asked him to go with him to go pick up the body of a deceased person. . . . He started with Phillips Undertaking Company which W. L. Dennis was managing. His salary was a dollar per week. And in 1920, he bought one-half interest in the Jones & Arvis Undertaking Company. . . . Then in 1923, he bought out Jones and changed the name to Boykins Funeral Home. And on April 19, 1924, he and W. L. Dennis got together and formed a partnership known as Dennis & Boykins Undertakers, and that was the first location with the Bridge Street—first location was on Bridge Street . . . across from the Mecca Drug Store. And later it was renovated and enlarged and was moved across the street where there was a more suitable location for a funeral home.

**Malone-Mayes:** And what were the reasons why they wanted to move across the street?

**Heslip:** I think the traffic on that side of the street was a little too busy for the serenity they needed for a funeral home. At that time, there was a street—an alley behind the establishment which was called Death Alley, and that certainly was not in a desirable location because there were so many confrontations going on that the people who would be coming for a wake or to visit or to view their loved one's remains, you know, didn't find it safe. So I think they were very happy to move across the street. They were still on the same street, but it was certainly a more suitable location. . . . Often when we left school at the end of the day, we'd have to go to the funeral home to wait because my aunt attended most all of the funerals that her husband had charge of. And we would go there and wait until she was ready to go home. So we would walk from Moore High School up First Street, South First Street, and go to Bridge Street and wait there until we were ready to be carried home or wherever we were to go that afternoon.

**Malone-Mayes:** And he would provide your transportation.

**Heslip:** Yes. . . . And if he knew he was going to be on a funeral and wouldn't be around, he would leave word with a driver to pick us up and take us to our aunt's house in East Waco on Elm Street. . . .

**Pryor:** Did you tell her about your experience at Goldstein's?

**Heslip:** I had been to Goldstein's shopping. After I finished shopping, I entered the waiting room there at Goldstein's, but blacks weren't supposed to sit there. As I sat down to wait for the car, a white lady ran out and hollered, "Nigger's out here! Nigger's out here!" A clerk came and told me I was supposed to get up, and I told him, "You get the manager." When the manager came and told me I was supposed to get up, I told him that there wasn't black or white on those dollars I had spent and I wasn't getting up. I was waiting to be picked up just like everybody else. During the argument, this nine-passenger Packard came up, and I walked out and got in it, and all of the eyes looked so funny because it was the funeral coach. (all laugh) . . .

**Malone-Mayes:** And so this is really Bridge Street in the twenties. Can you give some feeling of the life on Bridge Street in terms of comparing—just, say, like when the Great Depression hit, you know, in the thirties? Or were you too young to make any observations or remember any—for example, what happened to his business?

**Heslip:** It did not affect his business because people have to have food, and they live and they die. People continue to die.

**Malone-Mayes:** Now, how can they pay for the funerals?

**Heslip:** Well, they always paid him in different ways. They paid him in the hogs, and they paid him in property, or they paid him in whatever the crops that were good that year. They'd pay him in that. And a lot of them never did pay him. He had more money under the

ground than he had on top when he died. If you look through the books you can see where some of them never did pay, but he never did refuse anyone. He was just like a doctor. With or without money he would give you a decent funeral. And I've known times when people couldn't get a flower or anything, he'd buy a flower for them. He was very, very, very generous. Should have been a rich man but he never did become rich because he gave away so much.

**Malone-Mayes:** Another thing, on this funeral business, did he not have a burial plan?

**Heslip:** That's right. He had the Family Circle Burial Association, and a lot of members belonged to that. At that time, three hundred dollars was as high as you could get with Family Circle Burial, but at that time, three hundred dollars was a decent funeral. . . . They paid twenty-five and thirty cents a week for their burial premiums.

**Malone-Mayes:** Now, in the Depression years, I realize that people paid him in all these various ways, but did he not experience, if you looked at his records, a tremendous decline in cash?

**Heslip:** Well, the fall of the Farmers Improvement Bank that was also there on Bridge Street was unfortunate. When it closed, he lost quite a bit of his money. That's where he was banking and that's where he had his little savings, and that set him back. But he went to . . . Mr. Tidwell at Texas Coffin Company. They became personal friends, and he arranged for him to get with the white bank that would buy his claims and pay him. They would pay him the money and the bank would collect from the people.

**Malone-Mayes:** Wonderful. That was wonderful. Now, that was the thirties. And what effect did the forties have? In the forties we get World War II and Bridge Street really got to booming, did it not?

**Heslip:** That's right. That's true.

**Malone-Mayes:** In fact, where were you in terms of the soldiers? In other words, were you too young? Because I can't conceive of your being down on Bridge Street with the soldiers walking around down there.

**Heslip:** We were always at home when the soldiers got out to come over here. We were already at home protected because they had to work all day. . . .

**Pryor:** . . . But I can recall Bridge Street, though, in terms of activity. The Mecca Drug Store was just what we would consider an ideal drug store. I mean, you could go there and you could order an ice cream soda and other confections as well as drugs. You could sit down, and you'd have interaction with the people who were in town from the rural areas.

**Heslip:** Especially on Saturdays.

**Pryor:** And often they would do their shopping, and they would end up at Mecca Drug Store. Some of them would end up at Boykins Funeral Home because Mr. Boykins would have one of the men who worked there to carry them home no matter which direction in the rural area. So they would do their little grocery shopping and they would go to the square and do their clothing shopping. And there was a fish market that everybody patronized because they had good fish. And the women, in particular, would know that if they came to Boykins, he would see that they got home. So, really, we were just the center of activity there. One business helped the other business. The men would go to get their haircuts there on Bridge Street, and I think they had a good relationship with different businesses there until night would fall on the weekends. And of course, as my sister said, the soldiers would come to town and it was best just to leave it to them because they would frequent the—at that time they could buy—I think they could buy liquor, couldn't they? . . .

**Heslip:** . . . That was back in the early forties. I'm almost sure they could because there'd have to be some reason for the people to get so spirited and to have the conflicts and confrontations they did. . . .

**Pryor:** And we could look forward to getting some remains every Saturday night.

**Heslip:** Almost. That's true because there was going to be a shooting or a fight.

**Pryor:** They did more stabbing then. It was rare to find people shooting each other. I guess they just didn't have guns, but such things as stabbing and—

**Heslip:** Choking until their tongues fell out. . . . On Saturday nights maybe he would have two or three. He had an ambulance service during that time. He ran his own ambulance service. . . .

**Malone-Mayes:** . . . What was his interrelationship with the political scene? For example, I know that Lawyer [Richard D.] Evans was—was he on Bridge Street during the same time of Lawyer R. D. Evans? And I know Lawyer Evans, from reading the available correspondence, that he was sort of a political activist. . . .

**Heslip:** . . . He and Judge Evans had a close relationship. In fact, I think we have a picture down to the funeral home where they're both on it. . . . But yes, Mr. Boykins was involved politically. He wasn't what you call—what do we call these people—he wasn't an anti, but he believed in sitting down and negotiating with authority and trying to help improve things. Very interested in the organizations like the YWCA—I mean YMCA and anything that was for the betterment of the community. In fact, he once sponsored a baseball league for young men. At first I think they had competitions at Katy Park, then. That's where they played. And he was a real baseball fan. I would go to the games. We would even go to Houston sometimes to the games. . . . He was very generous. He belonged to Second Baptist Church, and when they had financial trouble, he's supposed to have bailed them out completely because he just had an inner desire to help and to give. He didn't seem to want too much for himself. The more he could serve the people, if they could pay or if they could not pay, that's what he did. . . .

**Pryor:** They would seek him out. They'd come by there and they wouldn't sign papers or buy property or do anything unless E. G. looked over it. If E. G. said it was all right, then they would do it. They had a lot of confidence and trust in him, the older people and people in Gatesville and McGregor at that time. He had that reputation at Gatesville and McGregor. He was burying just about everybody in that part of Texas, and they had the utmost confidence in him.

**Heslip:** Yes, he would advise people about the property and even sometimes family things, people who have children and needed help or were in college. In fact, he advanced money even for tuition and the like. If he got it back it was all right, if not—if he saw the kid come out to be an outstanding person he would say, "Well, I helped make that child." And everybody was almost a relative to him because they'd call him E. G., and he'd call them "baby" and "honey" and "sugar" and "aunt." In fact, there's one lady who never bought a pair of shoes. She told me she'd never bought herself a pair of shoes. E. G. bought every pair of shoes she wore. And I think Mr. Vickey says that when his mother was struggling with them, he would go to Lacy Coal Company and order whatever amount it would take to carry a family through. He'd order their coal every year. So it was just a matter of helping your people and being with them, and not fighting so much for rights as just helping where it was needed right there at home, food and clothing and housing and what have you.

**Malone-Mayes:** And this was a very hard period, too, back in that period where people were having a very hard time surviving.

**Heslip:** That's true. And Mrs. Boykins had two families there on her street—we lived at 1016 Primrose Street—and she was Santa Claus to them every Christmas. She bought their shoes and clothes and dressed them up at Easter time, and they were very grateful. They would come over and do things around the house for her. We never did have to do too much because he was so good to people, people were always asking what could they do for him. . .

**Malone-Mayes:** And this was the reputation he had throughout the city of being a very trustworthy person.

**Heslip:** . . . And any number of times he would take the risk of signing notes at the banks and all for people. He had a good relationship with the white business community. He certainly did. . . . But he would always insist as best you could that you patronize black businesses. . . . He wouldn't let anybody do any repairs on his home or anything unless they were black. He certainly was loyal to the business community. He and Dr. Clemons were very closely related in terms of business and friends, too. And the Atlanta Life Insurance Company had its offices, I think, upstairs, and one of the other insurance companies. He worked very closely with the black insurance companies. He would encourage his clients to seek insurance policies. And I recall, I think there was a lady who ran a second-hand clothing shop, Rudolph Frierson's mother, there on Bridge Street. It seems to me she was to the left of Boykins establishment, going toward the bridge, after he moved on the same side as the

Mecca Drug Store. Mrs. Frierson. Then there was a restaurant, a cafe. How often we would eat there.

**Pryor:** Irene's Café, and he helped finance her.

**Heslip:** Yes, I think he set her up in business. . . . I know he was a close friend of Mr. Ashford, who had a restaurant over on the corner of Second Street.

**Malone-Mayes:** On Second Street.

**Heslip:** That's right. That was more or less just a little business community; Franklin, Second and Franklin and Bridge Street. The Square we called it. You would find, sometimes, black people operating the cafes or restaurants—

**Malone-Mayes:** Or barber shops.

**Heslip:** That's right, barber shops.

**Pryor:** And they had a beauty shop on the corner.

**Heslip:** Yes, and then there was the Gem Theater, too, that wasn't too far from that. It was on the Square, I think. It was destroyed during the tornado. . . . [I]t did cripple a lot of black businesses there. In fact, it just destroyed the business community of most of Waco, the black business community, because there were few businesses in East Waco. But Bridge Street was just a center there. I think the mere fact that the people had to ride the streetcar, they could stop right there at the Mecca Drug Store and board the streetcar.

**Malone-Mayes:** It was convenient.

**Heslip:** That's right, going either south or east they could transfer after they got over in town. Mecca Drug Store was really the hub of all the activity. That's right. . . . The streetcar would give you a transfer that you could catch the bus to go to south Waco or north Waco. Years ago, they used to be street cars going to south and north Waco, but later buses were put on the line. But you could still—I think the East Waco line ran longer than any of the street cars. In fact, around there on Fourth Street was the Interurban station.

**Pryor:** That's right. The Interurban went on Bridge Street, didn't it? . . . Passed through Bridge Street going to the urban station. . . . That's the one you could catch going to Dallas and Denison. In fact, when I came to Waco to live, I caught the interurban in Denison. My daddy drove me that far, and I had been here before visiting. I rode all the way on to Elm Street. I pulled a cord and got off there.

**Malone-Mayes:** Uh-huh. But you could have ridden it all the way to Bridge Street if you wanted to.

**Heslip:** That's right. That's right. That's true. . . .

**Malone-Mayes:** . . . As you say, he had a great rapport with all the country people, too, who came in on Saturdays.

**Heslip:** Willow Grove community, Bosqueville, Axtell, Harrison community, all the surrounding communities. They could come there and wait or come there and meet their friends or whatnot. If they had things to bring in to sell, sometimes women had eggs to bring to the market, they could come and stop there with them until they could make it to the places they were delivering. We never had to buy anything like bacon and eggs and garden foods, butter and jellies. They just brought that to the funeral home because Uncle Boykins had done some favor for them. He had signed a note or helped. Cakes and pies and everything. They were just brought to us.

**Pryor:** We didn't have to worry about anything.

**Heslip:** That was more or less his pay. (laughs)

**Pryor:** They had the World War II and everything rationed; we couldn't tell nothing had been rationed.

**Heslip:** He had a good relationship with Nate Chodorow, too, and Harry Daum and those merchants located on the Square. . . . Because often he would send people to Mr. Chodorow to get garments or material or shoes, and he would pick up the bill. My aunt and Mr. Chodorow would really have a contest on trying to, as we call it, Jew him down. (laughs) Because he had things just as good as Goldstein's if you knew how to pick them. We'd go there and shop, too.

**Malone-Mayes:** What is your opinion? Don't you think that there was a closeness between the Jewish business people and black people?

**Heslip:** Definitely. More than others.

**Malone-Mayes:** More so than even other whites.

**Heslip:** I should say so, yes.

**Malone-Mayes:** In fact, do you not even feel that when you got downtown that you had sort of a closer feeling toward Goldstein's than you did most of the other stores even downtown?

**Pryor:** That's true. . . .

**Heslip:** Definitely. And seems that their way of treating you, and the relationships with their customers, was a little bit different from this American white that you had to trade with in terms of trying on garments and making exchanges and things like that.

**Pryor:** You had a good relationship with the Jewish and the Italian merchants.