

Thiokol's impact still felt by local families

By TERRI HAHN, News Messenger

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The land surrounding Caddo Lake now provides a protected home for plants and animals. From World War II until the 1990s, it provided the security of a government job that protected hundreds of families.

"The impact that our government has on so many of us 'Thiokolees' — from the beginning to present and now beyond — I think it's important," said Johnny Frazier of Marshall, a former third generation Thiokol employee.

Frazier's father, William Milton Frazier Sr., and grandfather William Alton Frazier both worked at Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant throughout their lives.

Frazier, now the groundskeeper for attorney Jack Baldwin, worked there in the summers.

"When I was in high school, I went to work down there on the railroad repairing the tracks that went all through the installation," said Frazier, who also repaired steam pipes and eventually worked on the production line.

Frazier's many memories of the plant resurfaced rapidly after he saw photos of a guard shack being moved and repurposed as part of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge on the front page of The Marshall News Messenger's July 24, 2009, edition.

"My wife Joni and I were going into IHOP when I looked over and saw the Post One Guard House, from Thiokol, Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant in Karnack," Frazier said. "As I read the article, the faces and beautiful memories began to flood my soul."

Frazier contacted others who had deep ties with Thiokol after that, including Eleanor Briggs of the Harrison County Historical Museum as well as Jack and Nancy Canson, who are deeply involved with protecting Caddo Lake.

"As we grow older, it is so good to share the things we have had in common. Thiokol was important for so many of us," Frazier said.

Frazier's grandfather, who went by Alton, was a farmer before working as a carpenter for Ford, Bacon and Davis, the general contractors that built the plant for the U.S. government.

"I remember my grandfather being a carpenter above all else," he said. "I never knew my grandfather was a farmer."

Alton Frazier bought a pickup truck in 1938, which he drove from the Noonday Community near Hallsville to Whetstone Square. From there, he took a bus to the plant, where carpenters were paid \$1.12 an hour.

This was during a time when workers earned 15 cents an hour at the saw mill.

"He made considerably more working for the government than he could as a farmer or at the saw mill," Frazier said.

During a recent visit, James Frazier, Alton's son, told many "wonderful stories" from his early days.

"James remembered when his Daddy Alton came home and laid two \$20 bills on his mother Beula's lap and told her, 'This is the end of cotton and corn,'" said Frazier. "She replied, 'We'll starve to death,' and he countered, 'We are starving anyhow.'"

Frazier still has his grandfather's wooden tool box, which his uncle described as always having "quality tools in excellent condition."

In all, Frazier has a rather large collection of photos and other memorabilia from his father's years as security chief.

While they are simply family keepsakes now, many of the photos and items were subject to strict security measures during the golden age of the plant.

"Everyone fondly referred to him as chief — Chief Frazier," Frazier said, recalling how family and friends called his father "Mit."

Milton Frazier attended Hallsville schools. He was on the first Hallsville Bobcat football team and played from 1937 to 1939, lettering all three years. His letter jacket hangs in the Hall of Fame at Bobcat Stadium's field house, Frazier said.

Mit joined the U.S. Army and became a military police officer. After returning to East Texas, he joined the Marshall Police Department before going to work for Universal Match as a guard at Longhorn in 1954.

"He was chief of plant protection until the mid 1960s, when he was promoted to security chief over the entire installation," said Frazier. "When I was coming up, there were so many of us whose fathers worked there, so we were all under the umbrella of the job security there."

Mit's commitment to the plant even survived throat cancer. He returned to his security work even as he learned to use a mechanical voice box.

"When cancer took his beautiful bass voice, he was devastated," said Frazier. "Heroically, I witnessed him relearning to talk and then work for several years thereafter."

When Mit retired in 1982, he even got a telegram of congratulations from then-Texas Congressman Sam B. Hall, who had given him a recommendation for the job while working as a Harrison County judge.

Retirement did not stop Mit from protecting others. Seeing to the security of those he loved took Mit to the nursing home to visit his mother and sister daily, Frazier said.

"When Dad retired from Thiokol, he would go to Merit Plaza Nursing Home and would make sure everybody was comfortable or had a cup of coffee if they wanted one," he said. "Sometimes he went two or three times a day."

Frazier is excited about tomorrow's grand opening of the wildlife refuge.

"Daddy protected that plant down there for 34 years, and now it is going to be a protected wetlands area," he said. "I think that is really fitting."