"I Try To Do The Best Job I Can": Herb Ruffin And Life In Central Texas And The San Francisco-Bay Area, 1946-2002"

Interviewed by Herb Ruffin II, Ph.D.
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This tape recorded oral history encompasses the personal and professional life of Herb Ruffin. The interview was conducted at Herb's welding shop, The Magic Arc, at East Menlo Park, on July 8, 2002, with his son, Herb II. This unique history between father and son begins with Herb's youth at Seguin, Texas, on his family's two-hundred acre farm. Quite different from most of Texas which was segregated like the South, the farm was surrounded by German immigrants and sold to Herb's father, Joseph, to keep him close to a cotton gin at which he was an expert operative. Seguin, today a suburb of south-east San Antonio, was an agriculture producer for San Antonio until the 1980s. Before the mid-1960s, Herb was a young farmer negotiating time between field duties and secondary education. After Herb's older siblings left Seguin in the early 1960s he took over the management of the farm. In this history Herb reflects on his experiences of living in an independent farm family, cotton producing, gender, and inculcated foundational values.

In Herb's personal life, he experienced the transformation from Jim Crow segregation to desegregation in 1960s United States of America. Although Herb's family was surrounded by German immigrants, he and his older siblings received a segregated public education at a school several miles outside of Seguin at Sweethome, the Black section of the area where most of Herb's family lived. In one example, Herb explains the complexities of Central Texas' color-line, contending that desegregation in Seguin public education was relatively smooth; whereas, a class trip around the Rio Grande area demonstrated that many people were not ready for general integration. This history is also one of the
few existing documents that outlines Herb's family lineage.

At seventeen, confronted with conscription into the U.S. Army, Herb qualified for and joined the better alternative, the Air Force. As one of the few Blacks serving in a military branch other than the Army, and on the frontlines of the Vietnam War, Herb made the most of his opportunities in the Air Force. In the service, Herb was an airplane mechanic on SR-71s, or Blackbirds at Beale Air Force Base (Wheatland, California) and briefly at Okinawa, Japan.

After serving in the Air Force, Herb remained in Northern California. In Wheatland, Herb met and married Sadie Mae Smith, who was from Birmingham, Alabama. A year after marriage the couple had their first child, Herb II, and moved to the San Francisco-Bay Area, where Herb I and Sadie still live, although they are divorced. In this history Herb also explains his education and ascendance in the construction world from laborer to welder in concrete construction on projects such as the New Orleans's Superdome and San Francisco's Moscone Center. After working almost two decades at Peck and Hiller and inventing numerous construction production technologies (without compensation), Herb left the company. In 1990, tragedy struck Herb on two fronts: he suffered a serious power-saw injury to his hand and a break in the relationship between himself and several family members. The 1990s was a reemergence period for Bay Area Ruffins. In the case of Herb I, his dream of owning a welding shop was realized on several occasions. Herb's left hand is still partially nonfunctional but his attitude towards his family has improved, thus restoring harmony to that aspect of his life. Today his past informs his present; he is respected as an exceptional carpenter and welder at Stanford University and at Magic Arc Welding.

Herb contends that success "has a lot to do with your own personal personality, and it has a lot to do with how you present yourself to people...me, I get along with other people; as long as they don't bother me, I don't bother anybody. And I try to do the best job I can." Herb also believes that living life to the fullest, paying attention, and doing whatever job right the first time is essential to his success.

Transcript of Interview with Herb Ruffin
Herb Ruffin Interviewed by Herb Ruffin II

Key

HRII: Herb Ruffin II
HR: Herb Ruffin

HRII: This is an interview with Herbert Ruffin I, at his welding shop, The Magic Arc, which is where?

HR: Menlo Park.

HRII: In Menlo Park. East Menlo, on July the 8th, 2002. Can you tell us a little bit about your past in Texas?

HR: Coming up in Texas (laughs) it wasn't fun. It was a rough life. I was born in Texas in 1946—the son of Joseph and Alvornia Ruffin. I was like their fifth child. I had three brothers and a sister older than I was. And...I was in the middle of the family. We had a farm down there, and as old as I get, that's how old the farm is! That's how long we had it, because I was born the first year we moved there.

I remember we didn't have any electricity. I can remember we got electricity, we got it in 1948 I believe it was. I was a little fellow. I was only about two years old. But I can still remember, because we used to have to hook up car batteries to the radio to try to listen to the radio! And then we got electricity, and that solved the problem as far as having to listen to the radio—you didn't have to use car batteries.

Then we had an old ice box that we used to use. We didn't have refrigerators. I mean we were poor, but we were...I guess you'd say, we were happy. We lived. We ate good. We raised everything ourselves on the farm, with gardens, corn we'd get from the field. Momma would can all this stuff up because we didn't have a deep freeze. So we canned all this stuff. She'd put it away for the
winter months. So when winter came we had plenty of food to eat. And most of the time, every year just about, we'd kill a pig and a calf. Butcher the meat and put it in a smoke-house, and smoke the meat to cure it. And big sausages were hanging in the smoke-house and stuff. Man it was good!

And then I started school real young. I started school when I was about five years old because my brothers would go to school down there in a big old truck we had, and the teacher said "send me on down too." So I would go down to school. And that's the reason that I graduated from high school when I was... I'd just turned seventeen when I graduated. I graduated pretty young.

And... when I was about fourteen, I was actually running the farm for daddy. Because half of the time he wasn't there, and I was just big enough to operate the tractors. All of the older brothers had left home. They were gone!

**HRII:** Where was the farm at?

**HRI:** In Seguin, Texas. Outside of Seguin—west of Seguin, between San Antonio and Seguin. And it got to the point where he wouldn't even come in the field any more. So I just did everything. And I my younger brother, Richard, would help out. My youngest sister was too small. We had to pick cotton, pull corn—a whole lot of hard work. And then during the summer months Daddy had this old big truck, and we'd take that truck and haul hay for all of the farmers all around. They'd bale the hay up, and we'd haul it in.

Now I went to school and... I was going to this all-Black school down in Sweethome. And then when I was in about the ninth grade, we were transferred to Marion High School. It was an integrated school, which was about four miles from our house.

**HRII:** How long had it been integrated when you were coming up?

**HRI:** Ah, it had been integrated since about... 1958, or somewhere around there. Blacks from Marion town were going to school already. But see, by being in the country, we used to have to go all the way to Sweethome, which was like thirteen-miles away.

And there was an all-white school like about two-miles from us, but we couldn't go to that school. And, then when they said... they forced us to go to that school. And I was afraid-d-d to go to that school, because I knew I was going to have a lot of fights. I just had the idea that I was going to be fighting all the time. But actually, to tell you the truth, it was the best thing that could have ever happened to me.

**HRII:** Why is that?

**HRI:** When I went to that school, they had... for a little Black school, we didn't have much of an athletic program. But when I went to school up there, they had basketball, baseball, football, and all that kind of stuff. And we could participate in those sports. And the learning was a lot different than it was at the Black school. You had more opportunities to learn more things. And I did real good there! Did real good. In my class... in my graduating class I was the only Black male in the class, and there was four Black girls. But I was the only Black male in the class. We went on a... when I graduated we went, we had a senior trip, and we went to Reynosa, Mexico. We went to McAllen, Texas. Then we went to Matamoros, Mexico, then to Brownsville. We went to Padre Island. Then we came back from there and we went to a Dude ranch. And at this Dude ranch, we stayed there for about five-days. But at the Dude ranch there were kids from another... from Nacogdoches, Texas, and they didn't care about Blacks—they didn't like Blacks. So I noticed one day, I was there at the swimming pool, and I was in the swimming pool; had my trunks on, playing with my classmates and stuff. And my homeroom teacher came up and told me, "Aw, Herb, don't worry about nothing going wrong." I said "What are you talking about?" They didn't tell me, but the other school didn't want me in the swimming pool. I guess they thought I was going to turn their water black (laughs). But, they said "if anything happens, we're all gonna fight." My whole class was going to fight this big school. But we didn't have any problems. They didn't bother me, and I kept going in the swimming pool. So there's lots of stuff that we had back then, in my life, that went
HRII: Why was he working so late, though?

HRI: The gin ran twenty-four hours a day, and he was the only one who could work that press. But they would cut the gin off around about twelve or one o'clock at night to oil it up for the next morning. And they would oil it up, and it would be down for a couple of hours. If something was bad, they'd fix it. And then by seven o'clock... and so while they were fixing it he would be out getting a little sleep—trying to get sleep. Because... and see he never hardly came home! He was there all the time. So when my brothers would come and relieve him, he would come home, take a shower and clean himself up, put on fresh clothes, and go back. OK. And then he would stay up there and he'd get back about twelve o'clock. Then he'd work from about twelve o'clock to two in the morning until they closed the gin down to fix it and oil up everything. And then, right back at six o'clock again. They would take off again! So he would sleep from the time that they were oiling it, from two o'clock to six o'clock. He wasn't getting much sleep! And then he was right back on the job again. He did this seven days a week. And that gin... They would even do it on Saturdays and Sundays. They were baling cotton. Because it was a season for cotton. It would last... a season would last about two or three months.

HRII: Was that something that your grandfather had done?

HRI: Yes! Daddy had worked at that gin for like forty years. And that's the reason he was so good at it. He started working at it when he was real young. Daddy worked there, and also his brother worked there, my uncle. He worked there; he was the engineer. He kind of worked in the... running the engines back there. But he wasn't doing any kind of work like Daddy was doing. Daddy was doing more work than everybody.

HRII: How did they get there, though? Was that....

HRI: How did who get there? Cotton?
HRII: Yeah, to the cotton.

HRI: The cotton would come there on a tractor...the farmers would bring it up there in trailers. And there would be bales of cotton lined up for five and six miles. They'd be lined up right behind each other. And they would do one bale at a time—one bale at a time. Every fifteen minutes a bale was going out. And some farmers would come in, they would stand...they'd sleep out there all night with their cotton, while the gin was running. And then it was over when the farmer would come and get his cotton sucked off of the trailer he would take off and go home and get another bale; because his pickers would have another two or three bales waiting on him again. And, he'd come right back again and stay in line again. Because sometimes some of the farmers would be out there like...two days! No, not two days, but like a day—spend a whole day and a night out there, because they'd be in line. And every time one trailer would move, they all would move up, move up, move up, move up. It was a pain! It was a big operation. And that gin would be going...that gin was one of the best gins around. It was the fastest. Because there was another gin that was like about eight miles away. It was slow, real slow. And they would get a third of the cotton that daddy's gin would get. Can you imagine? All them farmers around there would bring all their cotton right to that gin to get it ginned off. And this would last for three months or so.

HRII: Were there any um...outside of high school, were there any kind of racial issues over your family living right in the middle of....

HRI: No-o-o, never did have no problems, because I think one of the main reasons why Daddy got the place; got the farm where we are, is because they wanted him close to that gin. Because the cotton gin was only like three miles from our house. And so the reason why Daddy, got...they sold him that property so he could be close to that gin. So when gin season started he would be close, so he could come work, so that he would be there all the time. Because they needed him. They needed his expertise, because he was good at what he did. And...every once in awhile they would close down on a Saturday. So we're not going to do anymore until Monday. And they would close the gin down, and that's the only way Daddy got a day off. And they would close it down, and there would still be cotton lined up on the road. They got back Monday morning and there would be trailers of cotton lined up. Some had probably spent a whole weekend out there with their cotton. And they didn't want to lose their place in line, because if they lose their place in line they may have to go all the way to the end again. So they didn't want to lose that, so they'd just stay out there with their cotton.

And it was...an alright situation. I mean, there was always...you know, people say racial things all the time. But, you got to the point where they saw themselves that it was more stupid for them doing that than trying to get along with us. And then we got to the point where we didn't hardly have any problems with them.

HRII: What did your mother do?

HRI: Momma would be at the house. She'd be at the house most of the time with us. We were kind of little then. We'd be taking care of...that's where I would come in. We'd be taking care of the farm. Because, at the time, we might have...I remember we had twenty-something little baby calves. And those little baby calves in the summer time (they would be born in the summer time) they would get worms in their naval. And we had to catch them every other day and doctor them. You know, get the worms out, doctor them—put medicine on. And we'd do that everyday. We'd keep the farm running. We fed the hogs. We fed the cows. We took care of everything. We had cotton in the field. We would go out there and pick cotton. But also there were contractors that would pick our cotton too. But we would be out there with them, working too. And we would be overseeing the cotton. And when the cotton would get...when they picked a bale of cotton, then I had to take the tractor and drive it to the gin, and wait in the lines like everyone else did.
HRI: So the farm in Seguin was actually a farm. It wasn't sharecropping land....

HRI: No, no. It was our farm. And thank God it's paid for.

HRII: And Seguin is what, in west or central Texas?

HRI: It's kind of central Texas. It's kind of...I guess you would say south-central Texas. It's down low. You know it's 120-something miles from Laredo, and like about 200 miles from Brownsville, which is at the bottom of Texas. So, San Antonio is kind of right in the middle of Texas—but down-low. And Seguin is near San Antonio.

HRII: In terms of your family and everything—because I understand that that's like a hub of your family—what are some of the names in the family that come out of that area? That still live in the area?

HRI: The name of my family?

HRII: Well, the names, like family members and stuff.

HRI: Well, there was my Daddy's brother Addison Ruffin.¹ He stayed about six miles from us. And then there was...they were the only close Blacks we had to us for years. And then finally this guy named Daniel Brown (not related to us) bought a piece of land about a mile or so from us. But then he stayed there, I guess, for about six or seven years, and then he sold it. So, as of right now, there's still not many...there's not any Blacks around us there. Except....

HRII: What about cousins and....

HRI: There are no relatives close to us. All the relatives that we would have would be down in Sweethome, this little Black community down there. And, that's about 13 miles away.

HRII: Where did people go to school?

HRI: Yes, where we went to school at—at Sweethome. And we had...we didn't have any relatives from my Momma's side down there, because she stayed in another Black community farther down, Low Colony or Zion Hill. Like about 15 miles away, or farther than that. And, my Daddy's family was down there in Sweethome. And that's where we went to school. It's where we went to church. It's where we grew up at mostly, when I was there. And, my sister, Dorothy Jean, got married. They tore the old church down and built a new church. And my sister was the first person that got married in that new church. They built the church in 1953—I will never forget that. And my sister got married in 1955. So it was a new church when she got married. And that church and the school are still standing! They used the old school; nobody goes to the school there, but the old school they use it for...old people. Old people go there—every day they go there—senior citizens is what I am trying to say. They come there. They play games. They play dominos. They play cards. They do stuff like that. But the church, the church is still a going thing. Everybody still goes to church down there. Then after I went to school in Marion, I graduated from high school. Then I worked for this guy named Brewer—1963. I worked for him for six dollars a day, from sun-up to sun-down. We were driving tractors. We were planting coastal Bermuda grass, and hauling hay. We did just about anything anybody wanted done as far as doing stuff with tractors and stuff: baling hay, hauling hay, planting coastal Bermuda grass, hauling cows—doing everything. Then I left from there and went to the steel mill in Seguin. I worked at the steel mill for like...I went there in 1964, and I worked there for about a year.

HRII: All of this around the same area?

HRI: In Seguin, which is not far from our house, I worked at the

¹Addison Shephard is Punch; and Addison Ruffin is Punch's grandfather; James Shephard, Jr. is Sugarman.
steel mill. And I worked on the furnace. And when I worked on the furnace, being a country kid; working on the furnace...I was always a big guy. So, working on the furnace; they put me on the furnace right away. Then I worked with a bunch of crazy dudes on the furnace. And then I stayed there till Uncle Sam called me to come in the military. And I went into the military.

HRII: Was that by draft?

HRI: Well they were going to draft me into the Army. Vietnam was on fire then, in ’65. And, so instead of going into the Army I joined the Air Force, because I didn’t want to go into the Army or the Marines and go over there shooting at and killing people when I don’t know what I’m killing them for. And at the same time, when you go over there and fight in those wars and come back, you come back and go to a restaurant and they won’t even serve you (referring to Black Americans and segregation). You had to go to the back. And then the same people that you’re shooting at, they come over here, and they can go any place that they want to go! But yet, we (Blacks) couldn’t go. So, this is one of the reasons why I said I’m going to join the Air Force. So I joined the Air Force. When I joined the Air Force I went to school to be a jet mechanic. And I was an aircraft mechanic. I graduated from tech school. But I came out to Beale Air Force Base in Marysville, California. When I got there, they told me forget everything I’d learned in tech school, because the plane I was working on here is altogether different. And it was! The SR-71. It was the fastest airplane in the world. And it still is today.

HRII: Does it go by another name?

HRI: No. It’s still the SR-71, Blackbird. And, I worked on that airplane for four years. All the guys that went to Beale Air Force Base with me went to different places. They went to Philippines. They went to Vietnam. They went to Thailand. They went all over! But, I am the only one that stayed, that they didn’t send any place. I stayed there the whole four years that I was there.

HRII: So you stayed in California for the most part?

HRI: I stayed in California for the whole time. I went TDY (temporary duty) to Okinawa (Japan) for four months, and then I came back. And this was just right after me and your Mom got married.

HRII: What year was that? Probably ’68?

HRI: This was about ’68. You were born in ’69, right? It was about ’68. And then in ’69 you were born at Beale Air Force Base....

HRII: What did you do in Okinawa?

HRI: Same thing. Worked...see they sent three of our airplanes over there, and they would fly missions over Vietnam. From Okinawa they would fly to Vietnam and fly missions. So we had to go over there and maintain the airplanes. So they would send so many of us over there at a time. So I went over there for four months, did my time, and came back. And then I went...then it was time for me to get discharged. They told me I could get out, the war was ending, and I could get an early out. This was like in...July (1969). But I wouldn’t take the early out, because you were about to be born. If I would’ve gotten out of the military, well then I’d have to pay thousands of dollars for you to be born. But, by me staying in the military, I only had to pay like seven dollars. So I just stayed in and did my regular time, and got out in November (1969). Then I came back down here in the Bay Area. My cousins...Sadie, your mother, she was working at...Sunset Magazine I believe it was.

HRII: (laughing) Yeah, Sunset Magazine.

HRI: Yeah, Sunset Magazine. She went back to Sunset; because she had quit Sunset and moved up there (to Marysville) with me. And then she went back...before I got out she came down here.
HRII: Moving where?

HRI: See, before you were born, when she was pregnant with you, she moved to Marysville, and was staying with me. We stayed in Wheatland. A little town called Wheatland right outside the base, until you were born. Then, after you were born and I was about to get out, she moved back down here to the Bay Area. And when she moved down here she got her job back. And, when she got her job back, well then, I was off from work from like November, December, and then January started working at Peck and Hiller (concrete construction company). I started working with them as a laborer. Then I would go to school—I would go to school at night. I’d go to school at night at OICW (Organization Industrial Corporation West) for welding and automotive mechanic. Then I went to De Anza (Community College) for two years for automotive engineering. And then Peck and Hiller...I would go to work during the day and then I would take off and go to school at night, when you were a little fellow. And then Peck and Hiller found out that I could weld! When they found out I was going to school for welding they moved me into the shop, into the yard. And then they had all this welding for me to do. And I made, we made all these 4-wheel drive vehicles and all this stuff. And then there was a guy that was a saw man there in the yard. He decided to quit. He wanted to go to another company. So when he quit they asked me if I could run the saws and take his place. I told them yes! So right away they put me in the Carpenters Union. When I got in the Carpenters Union, then I made all this fancy stuff for them. And I worked for those people for twenty three years.

HRII: What were some of the places that ya’ll did your work at?

HRI: We built the Moscone Center. We did the New Orleans Superdome. We did the Pier 39 Parking Garage. Just about every big building you could think of around the Bay Area, we did it.

HRII: This is concrete?

HRI: Concrete forming company. We would make parking garages. We did all kinds of stuff. We didn’t do any bridges, but we did the San Francisco Airport. We did a lot of buildings—a lot of big buildings—buildings at Stanford. Then after that...I made them a lot of stuff. And then work got real slow.

HRII: When was this about?

HRI: This is at Peck and Hiller. This is back in 19--about 1989/90. 1989. And work got real slow, so they decided that they would...they asked me, “well we want to lay you off. We got to lay you off for a few months because work is slow,” and this and that and the other. But yet, at the same time, they closed down this yard we had in Los Angeles, and all the people from Los Angeles, they brought them up here (to the Bay Area). And the reason I feel they did that, because everything that they had down in Los Angeles was something that I had made for them. Everything in that yard they’ve got right to this day is stuff that I made for them: saws, and sheds, and all kinds of stuff—beam-side tables, column tables....

HRII: Where you compensated for it?

HRI: I was just paid regular wages! Just like everybody else was. But you would think they would have more respect for you, after building all this crap for them, to try to keep you on. But then they said, “Well we’re gonna lay you off.” So they tried to loan me money and stuff. I told them “I didn’t want any money, because I want a job!” So during this time I said, “Well maybe it’s time that I was supposed to have my own shop.” So then this one guy...no, then I started working for another company. I went to work for a company that had been trying to get me to work for them for years. So, I went to work for them. I worked for them a week and two days, and then that’s when I cut my hand real bad. When I cut my hand real bad, then I was off from work for about three years, because I had like five operations on my hand. And this really set me back because, you know during that time I was going
through a divorce with your mom, and lots of stuff was going on in my life then, and it was all negative. And then I...after I got past that and I started back. I came back to Peck and Hiller, and I worked about eight months. When I worked about eight months the same thing happened again: they laid me off again. And this time I said, “Well, I’m going to go open up a welding shop.” And I found a place...a brand new shop. Big shop. And I opened that shop up, and I had that shop for one year. I was making barbecues, and I even did some work for Peck and Hiller.

**HRI:** Where was the shop at?

**HRI:** It was on Donahue Street, over here right off the freeway in East Palo Alto. It was a big nice shop, brand new. And the guy sold the place, and the guy that bought it told me that the only way he would buy it is that he wanted the shop that I was in! So on Christmas Eve they walked up and gave me a 30-day notice. Told me I had to leave—I had to get out. So this friend of mine that I helped move to Redding (Northern California), he begged me to move up there. So I packed up all of my equipment and stuff, and I moved to Redding. When I moved to Redding, I opened up another shop up there. It was a big nice shop. And I really...that was one part of my life that I really enjoyed—being up there, because things were a lot slower. Things were...the places to live and stuff were a lot cheaper. And the only thing that I regretted was moving away from you guys, my family and you guys. I hated that. But I had to do what I had to do! And, at the time, you know, I had all this equipment, so I started making barbecues. I did well up there. I could have done a lot better. Then that’s when my brother, and my mother, and aunts and uncles, and all these people died within 8 months...I mean, 18 months of each other. And I was going back and forth to Texas, and it was taking up most of my profits. That’s why I had to close the shop down, and I moved back down to the Bay Area. I got the job working at Stanford.

**HRII:** When was that?

**HRI:** This was back in about 1995/6, somewhere around there. Then I started working at Stanford. And then...I’ve been there ever since. And then I found a little shop here, and I got this little shop here. And I have made a lot of barbecues since I’ve been here. I’ve made a lot of stuff, different stuff.

**HRII:** Are there any kind of challenges working at Stanford, being one of the few Black persons working there?

**HRI:** I was the first Black person they ever hired permanent in the Carpenter Shop there. And it’s been good—it’s been a good job for me. Right now, I’m kind of gotten back on my feet a little bit. It’s helped to...I made enough money to, kind of live like I want to live. And...I can’t leave out the Kellys. They’ve been real good to me, because....

**HRII:** The Kellys? Who are the Kellys?

**HRI:** Bob Kelly. Mary Jean Kelly (who is from Texas). They have you know...they’re friends of mine from playing racquetball. And they have a little cottage there in Palo Alto. They let me stay in there, and they don’t charge me anything to live there. And I have nothing bad to say about them, because they’ve been nothing but good to me. And, since then, as of...I’ve been working at Stanford now for almost about five years. And two weeks ago, they found out about my welding and stuff, and they asked me to...they made me an offer to work in the Welding Shop—would I work in the Welding Shop. I told them yes. So this is where I am today. That’s about all. That is where my life is! And I come, you came up this weekend, and I’m talking to you now!

**HRII:** So you’re working in the Welding Shop, what as a foreman, or as somebody who’s welding?

**HRI:** No, they got me...I’m gonna be the lead. As soon as I get my certification and have been in there for over sixty days, I’m supposed to become the lead in the Welding Shop. In other words,
I’ll be in charge of everything that’s...I’ve got to bid on jobs that have to be done. Like the other day I bid on a handrail job, to put up some handrails.

**HRII:** Are you the first Black to be hired in that as welder?

**HRI:** (laughs) Yeah! First one. There’s not many Black people out at Stanford to begin with.

**HRII:** What is the issue...or what is your secret for getting hired there?

**HRI:** I think it has a lot to do with your own personal personality, and it has a lot to do with how you present yourself to people. Just maybe your own personal personality. I think it has a lot to do with anything—it’s how you get along in life, and how you get along with other people. Me, I get along with other people; as long as they don’t bother me, I don’t bother anybody. And I try to do the best job I can.

**HRII:** What about farm life in Texas?

**HRI:** Well, what do you want to know about it?

**HRII:** Um, well, did farm life have anything in terms of success?

**HRI:** Yes, farm life in Texas, I think...I wish I could have brought you guys up on a farm. You would’ve learned a lot more about a lot of different things.

**HRII:** I would not be as much in computers though (laughs). Who knows?

**HRI:** Yes, you could have been. Because, I’m the type of person that wouldn’t have stopped you from going on to being a computer expert. I would have tried to help you, if that’s what you wanted to do. Anything that you want to do...anything, I feel a person wants to do, and anything that they’re good at, they should do it! That’s the way I feel. But like, when I was coming up as a kid, you’ve got to go get on this tractor whether you like it or not. Or you’ve got to go do what you got to do whether you like it or not. And it makes a lot of difference—it makes a lot of difference. I mean, me working on a farm, I loved it. I enjoyed it. It was a lot of fun to me. I guess it’s because my Dad...on our place we had a blacksmith shop. We had a blacksmith shop, we sharpened our own points. And for what I understand, my Daddy used to be, he used to be... he and his brother, they used to own a blacksmith shop together. And they used to sharpen the neighbors and people plow points and stuff for them. And so, I guess like father like son. It kind of rubbed off on me, and I liked that kind of stuff. Daddy used to work with his hands a lot, and I used to be right there with him. Anywhere he would let me go, I would go.

**HRII:** Did they (his neighbors) see him as a competitor out there?

**HRI:** What?

**HRII:** Did anybody out there see him as a competitor for what he was doing?

**HRI:** No. Not at that. Because, see, Daddy did...we had a blacksmith shop on our place, and we did our own stuff. We didn’t do stuff for other people. But, Daddy’s shop was a blacksmith shop and was primitive compared to what I have here. Like what I have here in this shop, you know...what would I need a blacksmith shop for? I can take, I have that saw over there, I have this machine here, I can take that plasma cutter and cut anything you want. He didn’t even have a torch. Everything he did was with a...he’d heat it up a cut it with a chisel or something, and maybe whip it out with a hammer. Well see here, I can work and do the same stuff, but a lot easier, because I have the equipment to do it with. And, when he used to work in that blacksmith shop, I used to like to watch him do that, because it was interesting to see what he could do with just a...heat and fire and what he could do with iron. Me, I
I Try To Do The Best Job I Can

guess it kind of rubbed off on me, because Daddy and his brother, Uncle Addison, they could do almost anything. They could build a house, they could be a carpenter, they could be anything they wanted to be! Because they had worked around this stuff all their life—you know.

HRII: So I take it, some of your other brothers and sisters have other skills as well?

HRI: Well, they don’t like the stuff as well as I did. Because, see like my...now all my brothers worked on a farm. But working on the farm, and liking to work on the farm are two different things! When I worked on a farm I loved to do it! Now my brother Willie, me and him were somewhat alike because if something broke he could fix it. And me, if something breaks I always fix it. So, now my other brothers...now take my oldest brother for instance, he was the oldest, but...I don’t know, he...we did a lot for him. All of us worked hard in the cotton fields and this place and that place. When he graduated from high school—from this little Black school I was telling you about at Sweethome—we all got together, and we worked hard to send him to college. He went for four years to Prairie View A&M, and he was like 30-something hours away from graduating, and he never did graduate. And then he turned around and went into the military.

HRII: What branch?

HRI: Army. He went into the Army, and he made that a career. He stayed in there for 20 years. And after he stayed in there 20 years he got out, and you know, after all the hard work we did for him, he would never hardly call home and say, “hi Momma, hi Dad, how are you doing.” And they loved him. I mean they would give him...they would just love to see him when he came home.

HRII: What was your relationship with him?

HRI: Me? I was young. I loved him! I loved him to death. I thought he was...he was my number one brother. And then last year, last Memorial Day weekend, he got killed in an automobile accident. And, it’s weird how time changes people. Me, I was in the military, and I would call my Momma and Daddy almost every weekend. Call them and just say hi. But it was him that they were most concerned about all the time.

HRII: Because he was possibly the oldest?

HRI: No. I don’t know why. It could be because he was the oldest. But, I would come home, too, almost every other year, or every year. But they wouldn’t see him for 10-20 years at a time.

HRII: How was your relationship with your other....

HRI: My other brothers?

HRII: Yeah, your other brothers and sisters.

HRI: I get along with everybody. I’m the one that never has any fights with anybody. I don’t argue with anybody. If I have something to say to them, I say what I have to say and then I’m not mad at them. I just tell them what I have to say!

HRII: Do they get along in the same type of way?

HRI: Well they get along with me. Because, like, when I go home to Texas, I try to spend time with one and time with the other. And I talk to one and talk to the other, and I don’t get mad at one, or get mad at the other. I try to talk to all of them. I try to be friends with all of them, because I try to tell them, you know, “We all are sisters and brothers. We need to try to get along with each other.” And, me, when I go to Texas now, everybody has their own opinions about things. Like the property down there now: we’ve got to do something with it. We’ve got to figure out what to do with it. Now, my brother that’s there now, Richard, he’s sick. He stays there, but he can’t run the farm. Honey’s too old.
He's pushing 70 years old.

**HRII:** Really?

**HRI:** Honey's 68 years old (unsure tone)?

**HRII:** Now, is Honey the oldest?

**HRI:** He's 67. What?

**HRII:** Who is the oldest?

**HRI:** Joseph. The brother that got killed last year is the oldest.

**HRII:** How much older was he than you?

**HRI:** Oh man! He's 70 now, and I'm only 56. So you figure it out: fourteen years difference between me and the oldest. And, it's a thing that we have to go down there and figure out the property, and what to do with it. And, you know, I'm friends with all brothers and sisters. I love them all to death. But you know, if I've got something to say to them, I just say it, whether they listen to me or not. I just say it and then I don't dwell on it. Because they're grown. And because being down there in Texas they...they do things differently. They're much slower. They aren't in a hurry about nothing. Life is real relaxed down there.

**HRII:** The last time I interviewed you (in December 2001) we were talking about one of the brothers that didn't make it, David, and how you had become the child who was stuck on the farm, in a sense.

**HRI:** Naw, I had...originally there would have been six boys and two girls. But the boy just before me died. He was two years older than I am, or a year older. He was born in '44—two years older than I was. He was born dead. So if he had lived, that would have been three boys and a girl, in the first group; and there would've been three boys and a girl in the second group. So, just at the time when I was just about big enough to start working, at like 12 or 13, all my other brothers left home. My oldest brother was in college, my sister had married, and my two other brothers had gone into the Army. And so that left me. And I was the only one left on the farm. And there were times when Momma and Daddy...they were used to having things done for them. They'd wake up, set the clock to go off four o'clock in the morning. I was the first one that had to hit that floor, make a fire in the stove, put the coffee pot on, and then go back to bed, sometimes. And then, my younger brother, Richard—see if I was 14, he was 12. So Richard never was a real type of farm kid that liked to do work out there on the farm and stuff. He didn't care for that type of stuff that much. You know, he would do it, but he would do what he had to do. Me and him had to go feed the hogs and stuff. We had to work together doing this. But when it came to driving tractors and doing all the stuff in the field, I was the one who...because I was the oldest then. I had to hook up, because there times when he would be too little. Me and Daddy would be in the field plowing. Well see, he'd still be at the house. And then, when he got old enough to really do something well, we were all leaving school, because he wasn't like I was on a tractor. I just go out there and take a tractor and...I just loved it. I just plowed all day. But he could never do what I did. And there's a difference in personality and kids. No two kids are the same. Just like you three (My children). You guys, none of you are the same. Everyone of you is different. And you've got to try to use...with kids you've got to try to get the most out of what each kid does. And me, I just enjoyed riding those tractors. I enjoyed doing that stuff. That type of work was something I liked doing.

**HRII:** Now, what are some of the last names that...I tried to get at this before. But what are some of the last names that came out of your family, like McIntire, Ball and stuff?

**HRI:** What was the last names?
HRI: You were too small to know them then. You met them. And, at this family reunion—now there's so many people down there that I don't know those people myself! On the Ball side of the family, there is so many of them that they've got to rent like a big park to have the reunion in. And they've got to take over the whole park. Or they have a big auditorium that they have it in or something. A big, big place. They have like thousands of them.

HRII: What about the Ruffins though?

HRI: The Ruffins is a small...it's an older family. And they're not as...they haven't had any family reunions that I know of.

HRII: So they incorporated with the Balls?

HRI: No, they don't. See we are Ruffin, but our mother was a Ball. So that makes us part of the Balls. We're kin to the Balls. And, like our grandfather and grandmother were Balls. So my great-grandfather, who is my mother's grandfather, you couldn't tell him from a white man. He had green eyes. One day when I was about seven years old...no, I was about five. We went to a funeral because one of his sons had died. He was sitting outside of the church in a chair, because he was an old man then. And Momma walked up and was talking to him, and she introduced us. She said, "Grandpa, this is my son. This is my son." And she told him who I was, and I was little, and I was shy and just looked at him. And we walked away. When we walked away, I asked her, I said "Momma, Momma, who is that old white man?" Then she said "Boy, that's your grandfather." And I didn't even know it. And so, we have cousins, you have uncles, great-uncles and stuff, that they look...they've got weird looking eyes, because of him. It all comes from him.

HRII: Where is he originally from?

HRI: I don't know. Now that I don't know. That you would have to ask my other brother (Vernon a.k.a. Honey) about. He could
tell you more about that. Or if you went to this family reunion you can find out about this.

HRI: Is this the Ball family reunion?

HRI: The Ball family reunion. A lot of people you meet could be your kinfolks.

HRII: How come there is not that many Ruffins?

HRi: Because the Ruffins are the older family. And they didn't stick together like the Balls. The Balls...son, there are so many of them. There's Grandpa Bob, my great-grandfather, he had like about...9 or 10 kids, 9 or 10 sons. And then his sons had about 9 or 10 kids of their own!

HRII: So it's in the sons?

HRi: What?

HRII: Your father and his brother....

HRi: No, this is from my mother's side.

HRII: But on your father's side there are only two guys who were carrying the Ruffin name.

HRi: Right, carrying the Ruffin name. And there was my Daddy, and his brother. And his brother only had one daughter. And she didn't carry the Ruffin name. She carried the name of a Shepherd. So daddy is the only one that's got...we are the only Ruffins. The rest of them are from the sisters. So we are the only one carrying the Ruffin name—us! Because Daddy had like...say five boys. And we are the only Ruffins. But like on the other side they had more boys than they had girls...on the Ball side. That's the reason why there are so damn many Balls.

HRII: What do you see yourself doing in about 3-5 years?

HRi: I hope to make it. I hope to work until I'm 62 years old.

HRII: How old are you now?

HRi: I'm 56. Have enough for six more years. If I work six more years, I want to retire, and then I don't want to live in this Bay Area. I want to move somewhere away from here, perhaps someplace like, maybe Redding—back up to Redding again, because I like it up there. I might move up there, or someplace where I could have a welding shop. And, I don't know. If I could get some money...if I get enough money together I'm going to buy me a little place...either build me a house and put a welding shop in it, and do the same thing I'm doing now, until I can't do it anymore. You know, if I feel like going out and making somebody a barbecue, I'll make it. If I don't feel like doing it, I won't do it. And I'm just going to sit down and try to enjoy myself. Enjoy life rather. And what I intend to do—maybe next year—I want to buy myself a new Corvette....

HRII: Before we end this interview, do you have any last word?

HRi: Well, I have two. I'm very proud of what you're doing. You make me feel real happy to be your father. And I'm real happy for what's going on. And I'm glad of my other kids—Toi and Michael. They're doing well. And I'm proud of them, too. Also, remember this, you never get too old to learn something. I don't care how old you get, you can learn something. Everyday of my life I learn something. Everyday. Today, I'm learning how to take this test for this welding—I'm learning about this. And I'm watching what these two guys are doing.

HRII: Where? At Stanford?

HRi: What they're showing me. What they're showing me what to do. And I'm going to get this! And I'll be good at what I'm...whatever you do, do it right the first time. If you do it right the first
time, you don't have to do it the second time. Because if you do it wrong, you have to do it over. So it's just as easy to do something right, as it is to do it wrong. So, the main thing as far as I can tell you is to just pay attention. Listen to what somebody is telling you sometimes—whether you agree with it or not, just listen. You might could take something there and put it together and salvage some of it and learn something from it. That's how I did it! That's how I learned how to weld and stuff, from just paying attention, because it's something I like. If it's something you like doing, go for it man. Go for it. Ask, you know...don't be a pest, but ask the question, "Why did you do such and such a thing?" "How did you do this?" But don't be a pest. The main thing is to pay attention and watch somebody...what they're doing. When you watch what they're doing and you learn. That's all I have to say!

APPENDIX:

Children Of Joseph And Alvernia Ruffin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Nickname</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Hooper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willie Charles</td>
<td>Hooley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vernon</td>
<td>Honey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>Jean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>(Died at birth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herbert</td>
<td>Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>(No nickname—some people called him &quot;Kuch or Kuch-all)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vera</td>
<td>Sister</td>
</tr>
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