

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Barbara Burnette Roane Bleil**

Interview Date: 11/02/2012

Interviewer: Roberta Terrell and Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Comments: The interviews were conducted at Saint John's United Methodist Church, Richmond, Texas. Two separate interviews were conducted on November 3, 2012 and October 8, 2015. 26 Pages



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Transcript

TERRELL: This document includes interviews from November 3, 2012 and October 8, 2015.

TERRELL: Where and when were you born?

BLEIL: I was born in Rosenberg, Texas, March 18, 1935, in the old Hillyer House, which was the only hospital in Rosenberg then.

TERRELL: Was there a doctor or a midwife?



*The Kinch Hillyer House was bought by two doctors in 1921 and converted to the Rosenberg Hospital. It was replaced in 1950 when construction on the Polly Ryan Memorial Hospital was completed. In 2004, Polly Ryan was renamed OakBend Medical Center, the largest full-service health care building in Fort Bend County.
photo courtesy of the Fort Bend County Museum Association, Richmond, Texas*

BLEIL: There were doctors. I think it was a Doctor Armstrong.

Both my parents were born in Fort Bend County. My mother was born in Needville, Texas, in 1911. My father was born in 1907 in the back bedroom of his family home in Missouri City, Texas. He came up in a house where the kitchen was separate from the house.

It was built from timbers from the old DeWalt Plantation, which was blown down in the big hurricane of 1900. They went out and got the great big house timbers and put it in this house on Bull Lane, which is still there!

TERRELL: Where is Bull Lane?

BLEIL: It's off of old 90A. It is still there but Missouri City has changed so, you wouldn't know it. You wouldn't find it. I might add, on Bull Lane, his brother lived there, his sister lived there (she lived in the old house), his sister Dannie lived there, and some other relatives, all up and down Bull Lane.

TERRELL: What did your father do for a living?

BLEIL: He was a lawyer.

TERRELL: Did he practice law in Houston?

BLEIL: No, he didn't want to practice law in Houston. He practiced law in Rosenberg, Texas.

TERRELL: What did your mother's parents do?

BLEIL: My mother's parents were farmers. My grandfather Kneitz came over from Czechoslovakia as a young boy.

TERRELL: How do you spell the last name?

BLEIL: Kneitz. That's not the way it's really spelled in Czech. They changed it to spell that way because that's the way it sounded. I think it's spelled Knjac.

TERRELL: What was his first name?

BLEIL: Louis (Alouise).

TERRELL: And he was a farmer. What did he grow?

BLEIL: Cotton, corn and they grew their own vegetables. They raised everything, eggs, chickens, potato bins, and pigs. They had a big garden in the back where they grew everything using rainwater. My grandmother had a flower garden in the front. They made their own lye soap. There was an outhouse and there was a smokehouse. When the children put a bathroom in the house for my grandparents, he moved out because it was not sanitary to have a toilet in the house. (laughing)

My grandmother and my spinster aunt lived there. She was a spinster because my grandfather did NOT like who she had picked to marry, so she couldn't marry him. They cooked on a HUGE wooden stove and a smaller one. They cooked the most marvelous meals and breads. They had a bread pantry, cakes, pies and all. I don't know how they did it!

TERRELL: When did your parents marry?

BLEIL: They married in 1933 and moved to Rosenberg, which is where I grew up.

TERRELL: Is the house still there?

BLEIL: Yes! The house is still there, on Carlisle Street. It's an old house. It's the one W. T. Hawkins lives in now, the Victorian that used to be a farmhouse, about a mile from town.

TERRELL: Did your father ever farm?

BLEIL: No. He loved to think he did. He bought some cattle and he bought some property, and he'd have little Angus cows. When I went to camp we always had the Waldemar girls come out on buses and ride horses and have barbecues. He just thought it was fun.

TERRELL: And did you always live in Rosenberg?

BLEIL: Up until I went off to college at the University of Texas.

TERRELL: Where did you go to elementary school?

BLEIL: Robert E. Lee Elementary. And then Rosenberg Junior High and then we were consolidated in high school. I think we were the first graduating class in the consolidation of Richmond and Rosenberg. But don't quote me – I'm not sure!

TERRELL: That would be Lamar Consolidated?

BLEIL: Yes. There was a big space between the two towns then. It was country. Between Rosenberg and Richmond were several miles of farms and nothing until you went over the railroad track here, where the post office is now. There were very few houses since it was all farm land.

TERRELL: Did you have any chores?

BLEIL: Oh yes, I had chores such as emptying the trash, keeping my room clean and bathing the dogs.

TERRELL: Can you recall names of neighbors who might still be here, in the area, in Fort Bend County?

BLEIL: Well, one of the neighbors down the street was Jean Canale, and she's still living here. Nelson Bass was across the street, and his second wife, Cindy, still lives here. We knew all the neighbors and I still keep in touch with some of the children up and down the street.

TERRELL: Where did the family shop?

BLEIL: We shopped at the Palace Grocery Store, we could walk our bicycles to it. As a young girl, I was not allowed to pass 90A. Unless we were with parents, we couldn't go the other side, so we went to Schaeffer's Drug Store for ice cream because it was on this side. We never went to Pickard & Huggins.

We used to ride the train! My father would drive us to the train and we would get on in Rosenberg, between the cars with the conductor, and we'd ride to Richmond where my father would pick us up (chuckling).

TERRELL: How much did it cost?

BLEIL: Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I remember during the war, we would go down and wave at the soldiers on the trains. Different people could ride free. All the soldiers rode free. My mother was an air raid warden, my father was in the Army. We loved watching the trains. There was an old ice house down there, too, where we went and got ice.

TERRELL: Was there a clothing store?

BLEIL: We made a LOT of our clothes. Mrs. Werler made clothes for me. She sewed all my dresses and clothes in those days. She even made the doll clothes. You know, Shirley Temple? I had doll clothes, all kinds of doll clothes. I built houses for the dolls and put them in it and changed their clothes occasionally. (laughs) It was exciting when I got to go to Houston for the first time as a teenager and buy a real dress.

TERRELL: A ready-made!

BLEIL: A ready-made – WOW.

TERRELL: What did you family do for entertainment?

BLEIL: Oh, we had big family gatherings. Mother and father played Bridge and Pinochle with friends. I can't remember what our telephone number was. The operator knew who you were when you called, and she'd listen in.

One time we had a babysitter and there were sparks in the little paneled den room. She was afraid to go down there. I picked up the phone, I could see the sparks too, and the operator said, "Oh, I know where your parents are. They're down the street, playing Canasta. I'll call them right away." So everybody comes over.

Gosh, we were always busy. I remember during the war, there was an area back behind the garage where we dug trenches, we built tree houses. The whole neighborhood played Capture the Flag, and Red Rover Red Rover. All the doors were open, nothing was locked. I mean the whole neighborhood, all ages, played games together.

TERRELL: Did you play board games?

BLEIL: My brother, George Grant Roane, III, and I played Canasta.

TERRELL: Describe a typical day in your childhood.

BLEIL: We'd get up, and I was supposed to practice the piano, which I hated. Then we'd have breakfast. Then I would go walk to school because we all walked to school. We walked home for lunch and we'd have lunch as a family, go back to school and then come home. The basic three meals a day.

TERRELL: Was there any issue with racism?

BLEIL: No, I don't remember any racist issues at all. We did have a black woman, Ida, and she was family. Lots of times I would go stay with Ida. She's the one that took me to pick cotton one day, with her. She taught me how. Loved her!

TERRELL: What was your favorite or most vivid memory about growing up in Rosenberg?

BLEIL: I look back and I have nothing to complain about. It was a happy life. It was a good childhood. We didn't want for anything. During the war, we were rationed, but we never seemed to miss or want for anything.

TERRELL: Did your father keep any animals?

BLEIL: We had dogs. When I was a little girl, my father was a state representative in Austin.

TERRELL: Did you go to Austin a lot? Or he did?

BLEIL: He did. I was a little girl then. He would go and then would come home. We went occasionally. He was also County Judge from 1953-1958.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Fort Bend County Clerk's Office published a listing of District, County, & Precinct Elected Officials, Fort Bend County, Texas: A Roster of Those Elected Officials Who Served From 1839 to 2009, dated 2009. The listing included the name of George G. Roane, County Judge, from 1953 to 1958. Mr. Roane was elected to the positions of county attorney (1937-40, 1943-44), Constable, Precinct #3 (1901-02), Justice of the Peace, Precinct #3 (1907-08) prior to service as County Judge. The publication can be viewed at https://agendalink.co.fort-bend.tx.us/mindocs/2010/CCTR/20100126_2126/2118_FBC%20ELECTED%20OFFICIALS%20Final%20Version.pdf

TERRELL: What are the major changes you've seen in this area during your lifetime?

BLEIL: OH, growth! People! WOW. When we moved out to Richmond to retire, we thought it was quiet. Crabb River Road was just a lovely little lane and quiet. Highway 6 and Highway 99 were not here. It is mind-boggling!

TERRELL: Did you work?

BLEIL: As a young girl, no. I worked at my father's office and earned twenty-five cents an hour on Saturdays dusting but not touch ONE paper.



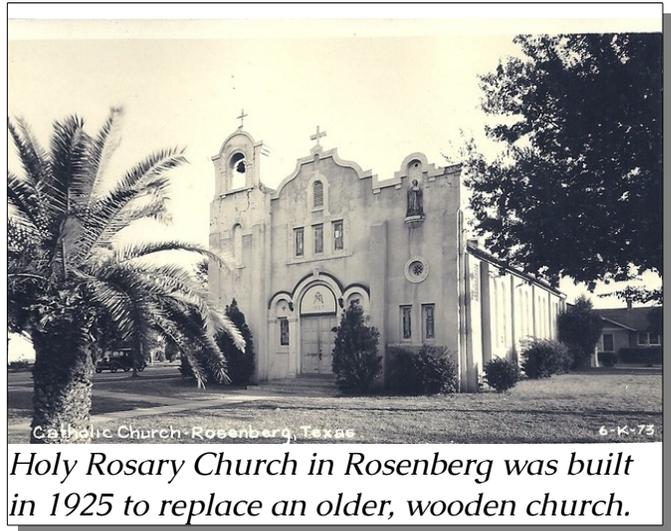
*Pictured from left, are the Garden Club of Richmond hostess and co-hostesses Ann Crosser, Joanne Anderson, Carolyn Culpepper, Barbara Bleil (hostess) and Sandy Scott at its first meeting of 2018 at Del Webb Sweetgrass..
--courtesy Fort Bend Herald*

TERRELL: What organizations have you been a member of?

BLEIL: The first thing was Girl Scouts. Then I went to camp. Then I was a member of a sorority at Texas, Kappa Kappa Gamma. In Houston I was a member of a number of organizations; but out here, it's the Women's Club, the Garden Club and the Museum. That's enough.

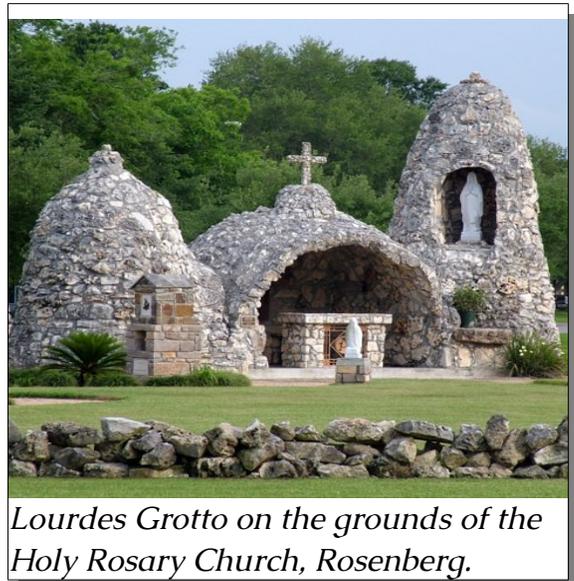
My grandparents, Kneitz, in Fairchild, Texas, had nine children, one died at birth. Mother was next to the youngest. People had lots of children in those days. They all worked the farms, except Mother and her sister. They just didn't like it. They had no real hired help, even the children worked.

They had black help DeWalt. The old DeWalt Plantation was where my grandmother lived. She was married to Mr. DeWalt before the Civil War. A lot of her help stayed with her after the war. They helped raise the children. Then she moved into Missouri City and some of the help was still there. My father used to go out in the kitchen, in the winter because it was warmer, and eat with all the people who worked there. It was a separate building,



I was born in the Hillyer House. The only other person that I know who was born there was Dean Lehmann. Jackie Lehmann's husband (Dean) and I were both born in the Hillyer House. It's not there anymore but pictures are in the Rosenberg history book.

We attended the Catholic Church in Rosenberg. It's the new one now, but it used to have a grotto and was right on 90A, Holy Rosary Church. And then we began to go to the little church in Richmond, the Sacred Heart. Because they did not have nuns there we would drive in to Houston, pick up the Ursuline Nuns and bring them out to Richmond. Another couple would take them back.



We had many arguments on Sunday morning trying to get dressed and get to Houston to pick up the nuns on time. There were several black couples and families that belonged to that church. We never thought a thing about race in those days.

First interview session ends.

Second interview session date: 10/08/2015

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill Transcriber: Marsha Smith

GOODSILL: After going through some papers that you brought in today, we've decided to focus this interview on some of your ancestors. To give historic background, the first Roane who came to America was William Roane, married to Mary Ball. William and Mary had a son named Thomas Roane, who lived in Virginia and was married to Henrietta Hearn. Henrietta and Thomas had a son named Thomas Jefferson Roane who married Mary Grant from North Carolina. They had a son named Thomas Ruffin or Rusk Roane, who was a doctor, and he married Mary Cochran on October 3, 1867. This is the first of your ancestors that you can actually remember a personal story about. So tell us what you know about Dr. Thomas Ruffin Roane.

BLEIL: He was what they called a major surgeon in the Civil War days and he actually served at almost every major battle during the war, from Antietam to Gettysburg. At the end of the war, he returned to his farm in North Carolina and found it had been burned down to the ground. He turned around and headed to Polk County, Texas. It is north of Harrisburg, what is now Houston. He met Mary A. Cochran there and they married in 1867. They had four children, one of whom lived, and he was my great-grandfather, George Grant Roane I.

The story goes that George Grant Roane I was a cattleman and a rancher in the Missouri City area. He had some land between Missouri City and Blodgett, which was a little community though now it is just a street in Houston. My father tells stories about when he had to ride horses and help with the cattle on the prairie, he could get the horse and 'ride the Blodgett' and buy something at the little store there. He was on his horse one day and there was a little girl running on the road. He picked her up and took her back to her mother and the black woman who was her helper (I think she had been a slave). That was my Aunt Dannie and she said, "That's how I introduced Mama to Papa." They met and married.

GOODSILL: I'm going to go back a little bit because George Roane I married Marie Louise Cessna, who had previously been married to Daniel "Danny" Joseph DeWalt on December 13, 1888 at Sandy Point, Texas. They had two daughters, Aline DeWalt Martin-Buckley and Daniel "Dannie" DeWalt Robinson. (Dannie is a girl who was named Daniel because there were no sons and her father's name was Daniel.) The cemetery came into the family through the DeWalts.

BLEIL: That's right. Their names were Aline and Daniel "Danny" Joseph DeWalt. Their father died young. It was the story of two DeWalt brothers marrying two sisters, the Cessna girls, from Sandy Point, Brazoria. Both men died young.

Daniel DeWalt's brother was Thomas Waters DeWalt. He was alive at the end of the Civil War and had a position in Fort Bend County during the Jay Bird faction. Both DeWalt

EDITOR'S NOTE: Thomas W. DeWalt was appointed County Commissioner Precinct 3 from September 1865 – July 1866 under the Texas Provisional Government during Reconstruction.

brothers died young and the two sisters both remarried. Thomas was married to Marie Louise's sister, Lillie. She remarried Enoch B. Mills from Sugar Land.

When Daniel Joseph DeWalt died Marie Louise married G. G. Roane and they had four children: Rusk Roane, Jimmie Roane, George Roane and Buella (Mrs. Gordon Bledsoe).

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Jaybird–Woodpecker War (1888–89) was a feud between two United States Democratic Party factions fighting for political control of Fort Bend County, Texas, in the southeast part of the state. The Woodpeckers (many of whom had been Republican during Reconstruction) included a number of whites and virtually the entire African–American population of the county. The Woodpeckers had controlled the county government by winning elections since the Reconstruction Era. The Jaybird faction, which included a majority of the white population in the county, wanted to oust blacks and their white allies from the county administration. Murders were committed against persons in each faction in 1888 and 1889.

On August 16, 1889, a gunfight broke out at the county courthouse, in which four persons were killed, including the sheriff. The Jaybirds won the fight and seized control of the county government soon afterward, with the collaboration of Governor Lawrence Sullivan Ross, who established martial law in the county. The effects of the Post–Reconstruction feud echoed in local politics for decades. The Jaybirds effectively disfranchised the African Americans in the county by using a "whites-only" ballot in preliminary party voting from 1889 until 1953, when the United States Supreme Court ruled that this was unconstitutional. --Wikipedia

GOODSILL: George Roane had some property near Blodgett?

BLEIL: It was somewhere on the prairie, like where Meyerland is today.

GOODSILL: He's riding on the road one day, and picks up a little girl?

BLEIL: He's riding near DeWalt and finds Dannie Joseph on the road. He picks her up and takes her home. She was running down the road. They were bathing her and she ran away.

GOODSILL: He takes her home and that's how George Roane I meets his future wife, Marie Louise? She was the mother of this little girl, and she's a widow so she's available to be married?

BLEIL: Yes, and Aunt Dannie used to say, "I introduced Mama to Papa."

GOODSILL: What was Aunt Dannie's personality like?

BLEIL: She was a character. She was bigger than life. She had her legs crossed always. She wore big, high-heeled shoes and had a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. And she called everybody 'daughter' or 'sister'.

GOODSILL: At what age did she start doing those affectations?

BLEIL: I saw a picture of her as a teenager in Galveston in a bathing suit and she was always larger than life. Died at 96 or so.

GOODSILL: What was Marie Louise like?

BLEIL: She died when my father was a little boy so I never knew her. I never knew my grandfather either. My father went to live with his older half-sister, Aline Pope. Aline was first married to T. Martin of Richmond, good friends of the Georges. He died in an automobile accident.

She then married Jim Buckley and they lived on Polk Avenue in Houston. I remember a Blodgett Street but that was the community of Blodgett before it was part of Houston.

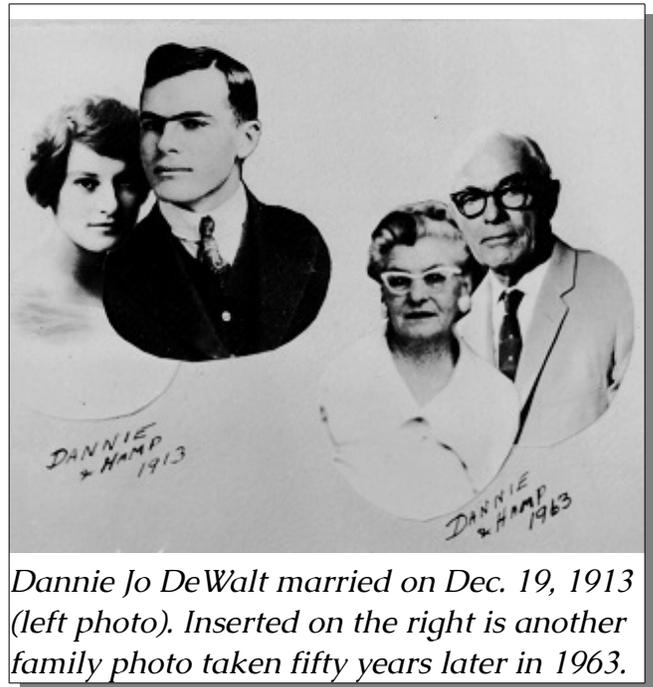
GOODSILL: Did your father tell you stories about his mother and father?

BLEIL: He told me that at the house on Bull Lane in Missouri City he always liked eating with the help in the kitchen, because it was warmer. He was a thin, frail child. He does remember going in the wagon with his mother and the black man. I don't know whether Beulah went or another brother went with them. They went to the little community near Freeport, where there was an old hotel, to go bathing in the salt water because it was 'healing'. They would take the wagon across the prairie with Baby GG, as they called him, (his name was George Grant so they called him GG).

My father also remembered that as a teenager they were shooting birds with Jack Adams, who was the son of Walter Adams and Miss Lucy of Missouri City. They were shooting blackbirds and eating them. Aunt Dannie found them and called the doctor. She thought it was terrible and they all might die. He also helped to herd cattle as a young boy.

GOODSILL: Did your father have other brothers and sisters?

BLEIL: He had two older brothers, Rusk and Jimmy, and his beloved older sister, Beulah. He loved Beulah. He loved all his family. They all lived there in that house that still exists on Bull Lane. It was named Bull Lane because they would run the cattle up and down there, and the bulls too, all along that road. The next block or two over was the main store and the post office, and that was it. On that one street was my Uncle Rusk and Aunt Willa Rue; Aunt Beulah and her husband, Uncle Gordon; Aunt Dannie and her husband, and across the street was cousins Gordon Lee Bledsoe and his wife Marie. They all lived there on Bull Lane.



Dannie Jo DeWalt married on Dec. 19, 1913 (left photo). Inserted on the right is another family photo taken fifty years later in 1963.

GOODSILL: They all got along, did they?

BLEIL: No. One would be mad at one, one month; one wouldn't come to dinner or Christmas.

GOODSILL: Do you have siblings?

BLEIL: I have a younger brother, George Grant Roane, III.

GOODSILL: And your full name?

BLEIL: Barbara Burnette Roane.

GOODSILL: Where does the Burnette come from?



Barbara with younger brother George "GG" Grant III, 1941

BLEIL: I had an 'aunt' (she wasn't really an aunt) that we called Bibby. She was a real sweet lady.

GOODSILL: Tell us about your father. What was his personality like, and what did he look like?

BLEIL: He was tall and lanky, very loving.

GOODSILL: What year were you born?

BLEIL: 1935. My father was 27-28 years old. He opened his law offices in Richmond and then in Rosenberg. That's how he met my mother. He was in Needville doing something and she was the manager of her father's store in Needville. He thought she was a pretty little thing and she had on a pretty blouse.

He was complimentary of everybody. He was kind to everybody. As a teenager, it embarrassed me to death. Anywhere we'd go, he'd never meet a stranger. He's always talk to them, and I'd be thinking, "Oh, my heavens!" But he liked everybody.

GOODSILL: As it turns out, your mother was quite a good dresser. Tell us about your mother.

BLEIL: Mother was born in Fairchilds, Texas. My father was born in the old house on Bull Lane, in the back bedroom. He remembers his grandfather, Green Kennedy Cessna, who was a Civil War veteran. That would be Mary Louise Cessna DeWalt. After his wife died, he came to live with her. He was apparently a character, but he was also a private in the Civil War and was in a regiment from Texas because he was from Sandy Point. It took him forever to get a pension, but he finally did. He'd had a stroke and my father remembers that they got a nurse to try to help him. He found out that she was from the North, and he got his cane and chased her out of the house! (laughter) Green married Mary Athena Houston. The house is still there and in good shape, it was built the early 1900s on Bull Lane.

GOODSILL: Let's go back to your father's meeting your mother in Needville.

BLEIL: Then they married and settled in Rosenberg where he had opened a law office.

GOODSILL: Where had he gone to law school?

BLEIL: South Texas Law School in Houston. He went to night school.

GOODSILL: While you are looking, I'm going to read about some other people in his family who were lawyers: "Archibald Roane was in the Civil War in Pennsylvania and was with Washington at Yorktown. (Transcriber's Note: Yorktown was in 1781.) After moving to Tennessee he obtained a license to practice law; was shortly afterwards appointed District Attorney General and was in 1796 honored with the position of Judge of the Superior Court of Tennessee. He was Governor of Tennessee from 1801 to 1803, and at the time of his death was a judge on the Tennessee Supreme Court.

Governor Roane was a cousin of Judge Spencer Roane of the Supreme Court of Virginia, and of William Henry Roane, a United State Senator from Virginia. There were several Roanes from Virginia who also served terms in the United States Congress." So he comes from a long line of legal people.

BLEIL: He lived with his older sister, Aline, while he was in school. He went to Saint Thomas Central High School.

GOODSILL: Did he make a lot of friends in high school?

BLEIL: No, because he had to work. He worked as a post-hole digger for the telephone company. Sometimes he only had an apple for his lunch, but Aline would feed him at night. After he graduated from law school, he came out here and opened his practice. I don't know where his first office was. I think it was in Richmond. And then he moved to Rosenberg because he had more clients there. Then he and mother married. Even as a young man, he loved the law. He loved to help people and liked to give away his legal expertise.

GOODSILL: Did he accumulate any kind of a fortune?

BLEIL: No, never did. (chuckles) Never translated knowledge into wealth. That wasn't his thing. That's one thing he and my mother used to argue about. She thought he needed to do more and he said that was not the way he was.

GOODSILL: That's interesting because his wife was the daughter of a merchant, so probably knew about making money.

BLEIL: He had no interest in making money.

GOODSILL: But he had a good career.

BLEIL: He had a nice career, he really did. Plus he always had a little piece of land somewhere and a few cows. He just liked having that.

GOODSILL: He didn't make money on that – it was just a hobby?

BLEIL: That's right. One piece of land that we really enjoyed was right here on the Brazos River, right outside of Richmond. It had a nice riverbank, almost across from where the bend of the river is, near the old fort. We could walk down along the river and across the old railroad tracks into Richmond, which was fun.

GOODSILL: Did your mother mind his having the cows and did she like being outdoors?

BLEIL: She never did participate in anything to do with the cattle. I learned to swim in the Brazos River, right up here, over her dead body! She loved to garden and was very talented with flowers.

GOODSILL: Which of your parents taught you your ladylike skills?

BLEIL: My mother.

GOODSILL: Was she fairly strict on how you needed to behave?

BLEIL: Yes, on your dress and what you had to do, and how you would behave.

GOODSILL: And your father?

BLEIL: He just loved you, no matter what. He was proud of his children and you always knew he was proud of you. Big hugs.

GOODSILL: So that would give you a lot of confidence. Your father was a generous man.

BLEIL: Yes. He collected silver dollars and he would go to the grocery store and give them away. Even later, when he was having chemotherapy and doing all the cancer stuff, he would put the silver dollar on the thing where you would place your arm and say to the nurses, "Okay, how many of these do you want to earn? If you make it less painful, I'll keep doling these out." It would give him a buzz to give away a silver dollar.

GOODSILL: Were you ever with him when he gave them away?

BLEIL: Oh, yes. That made me proud. He always said, "You get more when you give." And that's true.

GOODSILL: Do you remember any stories he told you or any law cases he handled?

BLEIL: No. My brother and I would come here to the courthouse in Richmond when he had a case, and we'd sit on the tile steps in the rotunda and wait for him. He didn't want us in the courtroom because sometimes people used bad language. My father never cursed in front of us, or any time. Nor did he ever talk about his cases. Once, when I was in high school, people said that Glenn McCarthy had come down to my father's office to see about getting one of his children a divorce. I asked my father about it and he said, "I just missed him. I never saw him." He would never tell you anything that went on in his business.

I worked for him and I thought I would pick up papers. He said, "No, Barbara, you don't pick up papers. I'll pay you a quarter an hour but you don't pick up papers and you don't touch anything." He left everything on the floor, stacked up. But he knew where everything was.

GOODSILL: He was good with details?

BLEIL: Yes. He had a good memory and was a good problem solver. He enjoyed his work. He enjoyed life. He really did. He was always a happy man.

GOODSILL: Eventually he became County Judge.

BLEIL: Yes, he did.

GOODSILL: Do you think he enjoyed that as much as he did practicing law?

BLEIL: No, probably not.

He joined the Army in World War II and he didn't have to, because he was older. He had passed the point of the age cut-off and he had two children. We all came home for lunch because we walked to Robert E. Lee Elementary in Rosenberg. There was no place to have lunch at school other than a special little room if you brought your lunch. He came home at lunchtime one day and told my mother that he had joined the Army. I still remember this. My mother went into hysterics, because he didn't have to go and nobody else was going. But he closed his office and left.

GOODSILL: Did he ever tell you about his war experiences?

BLEIL: No. Most of the men in those days never did. He became a member of the SIC. It was the first part of the CIA. A bunch of lawyers and judges who were part of the SIC. They called themselves the 'cloak and dagger group' later. They get together all the time.

GOODSILL: What does SIC stand for?

BLEIL: Secret Intelligence Corps, I think.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was a wartime intelligence agency of the United States during World War II, and a predecessor of the modern Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The OSS was formed as an agency of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to coordinate espionage activities behind enemy lines for all branches of the United States Armed Forces. -- Wikipedia

A post-interview search was unable to identify a World War II US military entity called the "Secret Intelligence Corps (SIC)".

GOODSILL: What did he do?

BLEIL: They interviewed prisoners of war who came back. He never talked about it. We stayed home and waited for him to come back. He came home unscathed. He was gone for about three years. I think he was in the States most of the time, but he never said.

I think about the younger men, out of A & M, like Joe Clyde Wessendorff and Hilmar Moore – they came back. Joe Clyde was really in the heat of the battle in Italy, and he never talked about it. None of them talked about it.

GOODSILL: It's interesting that your dad joined up at such a late age.

BLEIL: Yes, and closed his office, which Mother was so upset about. We had gardens and bartered. Mother's family still lived in Needville and Fairchilds and they still grew things.

GOODSILL: Tell us a little about your mother's family. Her maiden name was Kneitz?

BLEIL: Yes. It's a Czech name. They lived in Fairchilds and her father was very strict. If the boys wanted to go to college or get more education, he would pay for that, but not for the girls.

GOODSILL: That was a sign of the times, wasn't it?

BLEIL: Yes. When my father married my mother, my grandfather provided a dowry. Each girl got a dowry, but he didn't give it to us, he gave it to our husbands. It was several thousand dollars. My mother, who wanted a car, had a fit. They bought a car later.

GOODSILL: I bet your mom would have been a really good businesswoman. Instead, the money went to your father. (laughter)

BLEIL: My father didn't care about money! He did make money, trading land. His friends in the SIC, along with Dolph Briscoe who was Governor at the time, had a little watercolor picture painted, that I still have. It was an old shack out on the property and it says, 'For Sale – See George Roane'.

GOODSILL: So he was a wheeler-dealer when it came to property?

BLEIL: Yes. That's how he made his money. Not in the practice of law. My brother, George Grant Roane III, was a wheeler-dealer too. Still is. He was a lawyer also, but isn't any more.

GOODSILL: Let's go back to your Kneitz family. Her father came from Czechoslovakia? Tell us the story.

BLEIL: The name originally was Knajc and he was from a little town called Trieha, in northern Czechoslovakia. They had a farm and a lot of people in that area were weavers and basket makers. At the time that the Germans come in and were taking over, you had to learn to speak German. His father took mother and four siblings and brought them to this country. They had been preceded by a number of Czechs, who all moved into the prairie in the Schulenberg area.

GOODSILL: What was Antonio's father's name?

BLEIL: Alois Knajc and his father's name was Joseph Knajc.

GOODSILL: Alois brought five children with them. What line of work was he in?

BLEIL: Farming. They farmed in the area of the old Dubina Church, out of Schulenberg.

GOODSILL: Tell us your family's connection to that church.

BLEIL: A lot of the family is buried there. My grandfather had put a cross up at the front of the church. On the left hand side is a big concrete or stone cross in honor of his mother. That's Kneitz but that's how it was spelled. So he has his name right there. My mother used to say it was Antoinette because it sounded prettier! Everybody called her Toni all of her life. She was feisty.

They didn't speak English when they came over, but the whole community there all spoke German and Czech. Even when he married my grandmother and moved to Fairchilds, that community all spoke Czech and German and had a newspaper that was in Czech and German, too.

GOODSILL: Did your mother speak with an accent?

BLEIL: No, she never did. During the war, my father would say, "You need to learn languages." And Mother would say, "I don't speak German. I don't speak that." Of course, she did but she wouldn't. They were very embarrassed about that.

There was a prisoner of war camp right in Rosenberg, where Fiesta is now, on Highway 90A. It used to be the Fort Bend County Fairgrounds. There were German prisoners held there. People in the farming community would sometimes use them for farm labor.

After the war, a lot of those prisoners did not want to go back to Germany, but they all had to be repatriated. A lot of them came back to the U. S. They liked it here. We were never afraid and never thought a thing about it. We knew a lot of people who were killed in the war. Even a neighbor across the street was a pilot and died in the war. I had a cousin who flew in B-29s and they did all their missions and he made it back. But so many died.

GOODSILL: So you knew people who had been killed, it was embarrassing to speak German, and yet the German prisoners of war weren't particularly a threat to you.

BLEIL: No, I don't remember them being a threat at all. Actually, people were kind to them.

GOODSILL: I want to know about your family's cemetery land.

BLEIL: It was put into a Foundation so that no one could sell those seven acres. The approximate location was DeWalt, Texas, which is no longer there. It was off of Highway 6. It used to be the back part of the DeWalt Plantation, which the DeWalt family lost after the Civil War. They had already set aside this little mott of oak trees. We started planting people there.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In Texas, a copse or small grove of trees, especially live oak or elm, is known as a 'mott'.

The first people according to Aunt Aline were the Brown girls who came through on a wagon train. They died of fever. But we can't find any markers for them. Some of the original markers were wooden. Aline and Dannie came along later and put better markers, which are there now. People are still being buried there.

GOODSILL: Who is buried there?

BLEIL: DeWalts, Roanes, Robinsons, Bledsoes, and Cessna's because the two DeWalt brothers married two Cessna sisters. Green Kennedy Cessna is there and so is his wife, Mary Athena Houston. Those were Mary Louise Cessna's parents.

GOODSILL: It's a little enclave, near Lake Olympia.

BLEIL: It is surrounded by Lake Olympia. You can't find it but it's there. It's a well-kept secret. It's the DeWalt Cemetery Foundation. We did that so in the future none of the people could sell off any of that acreage.

GOODSILL: Is that where you'll be buried?

BLEIL: Yes, along side Bert. Eventually, my daughters will join us there.

GOODSILL: That's a place you used to go, and not just to bury people, but to do ceremonial things and parties?

BLEIL: Yes. We still have family gatherings there all the time. Parties too.

GOODSILL: What do you do at the parties as a child?

BLEIL: We played baseball and games. We still play croquet. We raise the flags too. That was in the day when we raised the Texas flag and the Confederate flag. We no longer raise the Confederate flag. We fly the United States and the Texas flags.

GOODSILL: But there are people buried there who were in the Civil War?



*Barbara Roane Bleil and husband
Bert Bleil, undated*

BLEIL: We have two buried there who were Confederate soldiers. Green Kennedy Cessna and Dr. Thomas Ruffin Roane, who was a surgeon involved in many major battles of the Civil War, from Antietum in 1862 to Gettysburg in 1863.

GOODSILL: I want to move on to a story I heard second hand which relates to your mother wanting you to be in good company. When you were a girl, you got to know the Kempner family and I would like to hear the story about that.

BLEIL: My father really liked I. H., Junior, who was the son of one of the founders of Imperial Sugar Company. I. H., Junior, died young. I. H. Kempner, III, known as Denny, lived in Sugar Land. I don't remember if they moved back to Galveston after his father died, or if they moved to Houston, but he married one of my good friends and classmates.

I went to Galveston all the time when Mr. Ike (I. H., Senior) was still alive. He was a wonderful man. He was handsome and his wife was very stately. It was the first really formal dinner I had ever gone to in which you had somebody behind you, serving. I went to school with his granddaughter and she and I are still friends, Lyda Anne Kempner Quinn. She was the mayor of Galveston for a number of years.

GOODSILL: So you knew Denny and Lyda; they were both your contemporaries? And you liked Mr. Ike and his wife, Henrietta?

BLEIL: Yes, she was lovely. Lyda Ann was a character and she still is. I was always one who was hesitant to do anything wrong. Her grandfather wrote my father a letter and told him that he had raised a fine young lady. My father was impressed that the old man would take the time to write someone to tell them his daughter was well behaved.

GOODSILL: Your mother must have loved it. She had sent you off with the right manners and the right clothes, and you comported yourself well with the Kempner family. (laughter) Was Lyda Ann a young lady as well?

BLEIL: No. Lyda Ann was fun. Her mother was a character; we called her 'Big Lyda'. She scared me to death sometimes. She was a BIG stern woman. She married an old Irishman, Art Quinn. Here she was, from a Jewish family and married an Irishman. He was a blustering, big drinking Irishman. What a combination. When they married, he raised both of his girls in the Catholic faith. Actually Zell, their Catholic nanny, raised Lyda Ann and Penny.

GOODSILL: So it might not have been too much of a stretch for Lyda Ann to raise her children as Catholics.

BLEIL: No, they don't anymore. Long since, that's not the thing. Once Zell died Lyda Ann married Jerry Thomas. I was in her wedding. It was fun! Galveston was a fun place to go. Even when I got married, Harris and Carol Masterson gave me a party at the Balinese Room. Harris staked all the wedding party to some money to gamble with. Can you imagine that? It was fun!

I went to see Lyda Ann in New York, and I wondered how in the world she lived up there. At that point, she had two or maybe three children and lived in Peter Cooper Village, an apartment complex. You couldn't walk into the kitchen if a drawer was open. You couldn't get by!

We took the baby down to the park but first you had to go down to the locked storage area to get the baby's stroller and play items. Later, you had to go back down to put everything away in the locked storage unit. I'm thinking this is terrible! Anyway, they did move back. New York is still really expensive. But she lived there quite a while with Jerry.

GOODSILL: Did it surprise you when she went into politics?

BLEIL: No. All the family has been involved in leadership and the community. There is a book coming out in November about the Kempner women. They've had to edit some things out! They all have been active in everything. The youngest would be Harris. His brother was killed in the Vietnam war. Mr. Ike was still alive then and he used to say he wished it was he who had died instead of his grandson. Nonie's (Big Lyda's sister) two boys are fine. One of them is a nice doctor. Interesting family. She had a family tradition of leadership. Mr. Ike started Sugar Land, and her uncle ran it for years. They did a good job. People living in Sugar Land today don't realize that WAS Sugar Land, on 90A. Now they think Town Center and the mall are Sugar Land. A number of years ago Richmond had 7,000 people and now has 12,000. Sugar Land had about 1,200 – 1,500 and now has 68,000 people.

Missouri City has also grown and expanded. Rosenberg has grown some. Richmond has really stayed pretty much the same because it is basically landlocked. All those little communities have expanded.

GOODSILL: Missouri City has grown about as far as it can grow. There is nowhere for it to expand to, because it, too, is landlocked. Did you ever go to Sugar Land with Lyda?

BLEIL: No. I went with my father.

GOODSILL: What do you remember about Sugar Land?

BLEIL: A lot of it is still the same. The houses back in there are exactly the same as I remember it.

GOODSILL: Did you go on family vacations?

BLEIL: They were all driving vacations. We would drive to Florida, to the southern states, and to California.

GOODSILL: Was it a point of pride for your family to be from the South? Did it still matter by that time?

BLEIL: I think so. I'm still a Southerner, still a Texan. There is something to that, too.

GOODSILL: Do you know what year Dr. Roane came to Texas?

BLEIL: Right after the Civil War. He went back to Rockingham, North Carolina but nothing was left. He got back on his horse and came to Texas in 1866.

GOODSILL: Is there anything I should have asked that I've forgotten? Anything about the Darst family or the Robinson family or the Martin family that you want to tell us? These are all people who are related to you by marriage.

BLEIL: The DeWalt family is of French Huguenot lineage. Thomas Waters DeWalt was the builder and owner of this first home. He was from Newberry District, South Carolina. He was the original plantation owner in DeWalt and came to Texas and Fort Bend County in 1840 at the age of 18, with members of the Waters family.

Philemon Waters had been a Revolutionary soldier from South Carolina. Thomas Waters DeWalt married Miss Charlotte Brown, and had two sons, Daniel Joseph DeWalt and Thomas Waters DeWalt, Jr.

GOODSILL: Do you know anything about that plantation?

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Houston Archeological Society published a short article in the August 2011 newsletter regarding the "The 1840 Waters Plantation and Sugar Barn Preservation at <http://www.txhas.org/PDF/newsletters/2011/2011%20August%20Profile.pdf>

BLEIL: It was a very big plantation but I think it 'went' after the Civil War. The only plantation that stayed fairly intact, and it wasn't the Dew Plantation. I think they used prison labor there (and don't quote me) and the railroad went through there, taking the cane to Sugar Land. I remember when they tore out all the railroad tracks there because they didn't need that line any more. If you go down Highway 6, the railroad went right there where all those stores are, on the left hand side of the road, going to DeWalt. It ran from the DeWalt Cemetery to Sugar Land, and probably from Sienna Plantation which was on the Brazos River. They had docks and landing areas there on the Brazos River, taking goods down to the Gulf of Mexico.

GOODSILL: Do you think the Sienna Plantation lasted longer than the DeWalt Plantation because of its advantageous position on the Brazos River?

BLEIL: Philomen Waters' first wife died and was buried there. I'm not sure how enamored he was with her. But his second wife, he was very enamored with her and built her a beautiful stone with marble urns. One member of that family took the urns. I know where they are. I think he just left it and moved. He died in Galveston. The house didn't survive, but there was something there for a while. I think it might be in your Sienna Plantation information.

GOODSILL: You had mentioned something about the Fairchilds Dance Hall. Tell us about that.



*The sugar barn on the Waters Plantation was made of homemade brick. The old sugar syrup outdoor stove is partially visible beyond the barn.
--courtesy of liveonthebrazos.com*

BLEIL: My grandfather, Alois Kneitz (Antonio's father), gave the land to build the Fairchilds Dance Hall. I have pictures of he and his sons helping to build it. We went there on Sundays and they had a polka band. Lots of people around this area my age remember that. People gathered there. Men drank beer, people drank soda pop, and they sat around and talked, played dominoes, and danced. Kids just ran around wild and had a wonderful time. That's where some of the original old Texas pine was, either on the floor or the ceiling. That's when W. T. Hawkins bought it, for the wood.

GOODSILL: I heard a story from Hawkins one time, I don't know if it relates to the Fairchild's Dance Hall – Hawkins took the wood from the dance hall floor, walls and ceiling.

BLEIL: Yes, my brother and I had benches made by Hawkins from the Fairchild Dance Hall. Some of that wood is no longer available. But at the corner there, the little cupola that sat up on top of the dance hall, is still there. I think it is still there.

Speaking of wood, the wood and timbers from the DeWalt Plantation were used by Mr. & Mrs. Roane (Mary Louise Cessna DeWalt Roane) to build their home on Bull Lane in Missouri City. My father was born there in 1907. The house still stands today.

October 8, 2015 Interview ends