

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Bobby McKinney**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill & Jesse Matthews

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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24 Pages



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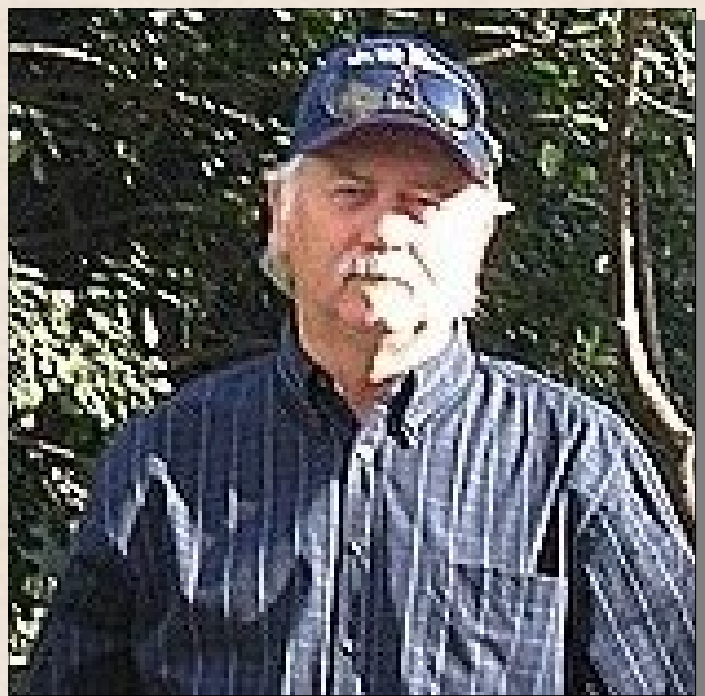
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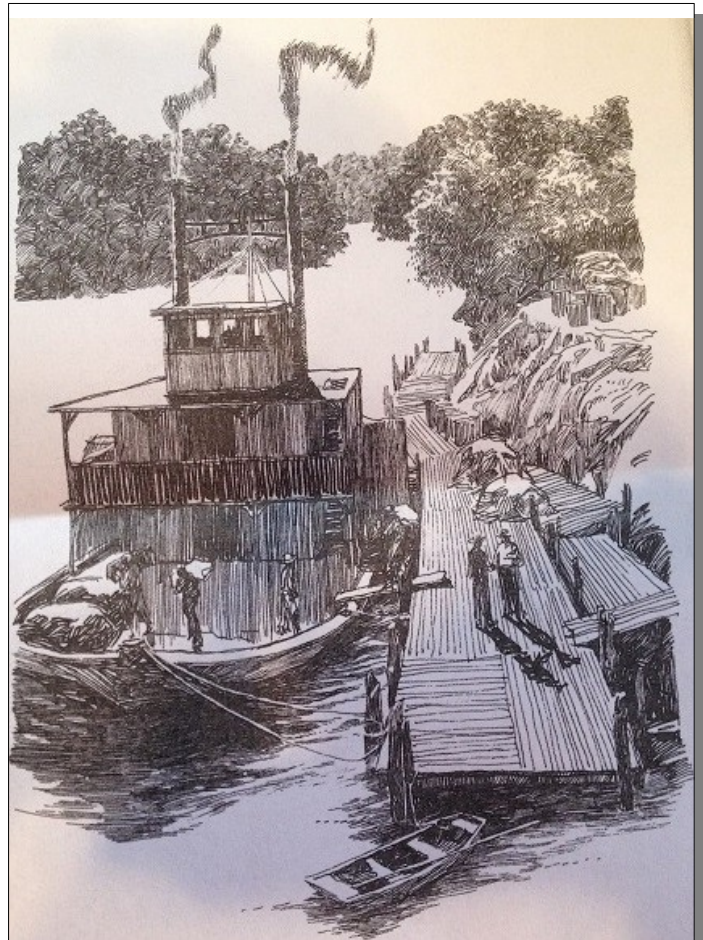
### *Transcript*

GOODSILL: Today we're going to talk about the Thompson Ferry area, the crossing of the Mexican army and other things about this area. Where would you like to start, Bobby?

McKINNEY: Let's start with Noah Smithwick's book. He gave a description of the ferry at Thompson's Pass. This was in the late 1820s. The name of his book is *The Evolution of a State, or, Recollections of Old Texas Days*. He mentions coming into Fort Bend County and says, "I skirted the river timbers for several miles, 'til I struck a trail leading through the bottom to Fort Bend (Richmond) where White & Knight had a trading post and ferry." White & Knight is part of the land that Jesse Thompson bought. So basically, what Jesse Thompson bought was on the leagues of White & Knight and Samuel Isaacs. Jesse bought the old White & Knight trading post. The ferry landing was already there in the 1820s.

Jesse Thompson was one of the early men in Richmond. He had the ferry landing in Richmond called Thompson's Ferry. He was a landowner all through Richmond, in the 1830s. The Borden milk people lived right across the river from Thompson. They were big rivals and Thomas H. Borden ended up shooting and killing Jesse Thompson. They had a feud over a land dispute. People said that Jesse Thompson was a braggart. They were pretty much enemies of each other from the start. They had their deadly encounter around early spring of 1835 when Borden gut shot Thompson.

GOODSILL: So, Jesse Thompson was dead by the time the Mexican army came to Thompson's Ferry.



*Illustration 1: Thompson's Ferry at Richmond, Texas, where Santa Ana's Mexican army crossed the Brazos River on their way to engage General Sam Houston's Texan army at San Jacinto.*

McKINNEY: Yes.

GOODSILL: Tell us about the ferry itself. What did it look like? How wide was the river at that point?

McKINNEY: The river was around 100 yards wide back then. The ferry itself was basically a landing with docks and wharves. There is a great picture in Noah Smithwick's book of what it would have looked like. The bank of the Brazos is high, so they had a wharf there. You can still compare that picture with what the Brazos looks like today, with the high banks and bluffs on each side. When Jesse Thompson bought his property from the Whites and Knights, the ferry had already been established for years. He just took it up and continued it.

In the *History of Fort Bend County*, Clarence Wharton's book, there is a passage on the Revolution, page 79. D. R. Pearson and Homer Darst were some of the old timers of Richmond. He says, "On March 18, 1839, Pearson and Homer Darst and I located the old road leading down to the river banks to Thompson's Ferry. It was near the east line of the White and Knight labor and near where the lower line of the Isaacs' league reaches the river." There are White and Knight leagues and the Isaacs' right beside it, leading down to the river.

EDITOR'S NOTE: A *league* or *sitio* is a measure of land equaling 4,428.4 acres of grazing land and a *labor* equals 177.1 acres of cropland. Spanish land grants led to the colonization of Texas and the Texas Revolution.

GOODSILL: So, what did you do at that moment?

McKINNEY: So, I said, "Well, okay, that's where the Mexican army is." The Mexican army, in the middle of March 1836, is coming through Richmond on their way to San Jacinto. They are camped in Richmond at Thompson's Ferry. Santa Anna crosses the river and goes on to San Jacinto. Generals Filisola, Sesma and others stay behind.

GOODSILL: How did they cross the river?

McKINNEY: The sappers (Mexican army engineers) made a log ferry boat. They are the ones who cut down the trees, made the roads, made boats or whatever to cross the river. They had to cross a lot of rivers coming to this part, and these are the guys who got them across all the roadways, passes and rivers.

In Jose' Enrique de la Peña's diary, *With Santa Anna in Texas: A Personal Narrative of the Revolution*, he talks about the sappers. He gives a lot of accounts of them being right here in Richmond. I took a lot of passages and notes from his diary. After I found out where the crossing was, I drove down there to take a look. They were building a subdivision six or seven years ago right where the crossing was. We took our metal detectors and went down there to this spot right here [indicates on map].

It wasn't long 'til we actually located the site where the Texans had skirmished with the Mexicans and found musket balls and coat buttons there. Some of the buttons are from the 1820s. We know the Texas Army was buying old surplus U. S. Army uniforms, cartridge boxes, canteens, etc, from the 1820 period. The eagle buttons were from 1820 U. S. frock coats. So in retrospect, we located the lost skirmish site where Wiley Martin's men were guarding the ferry to keep the Mexican Army from crossing. They were outnumbered by the Mexican Cavalry and skedaddled up to where Fulshear is now.

After finding the artifacts at this site, we decided to see where there might be more sites. We knocked on some doors on Pultar Road to get permission to hunt on private property, and we found one of the Mexican Army camps. We found musket balls, buttons from Aldama's Battalion, which was Number Six, a breastplate from the Guerrero Battalion and other miscellaneous gun parts and artifacts from the Mexican Army. We also knew that they were camped along the banks of the Brazos on the east side. When they built the Grand River Subdivision, the developer was a close friend of mine, and he and I took our metal detectors out and found another Mexican Army camp. That went along with what de la Peña said in his diary, that they had camped on both the left-hand and right-hand side of the Brazos.

Here's a map right here. This is on River Look Court. Right here, in those people's yard, is where part of the Mexican Army was camped.

GOODSILL: How much time did it take to do this research?

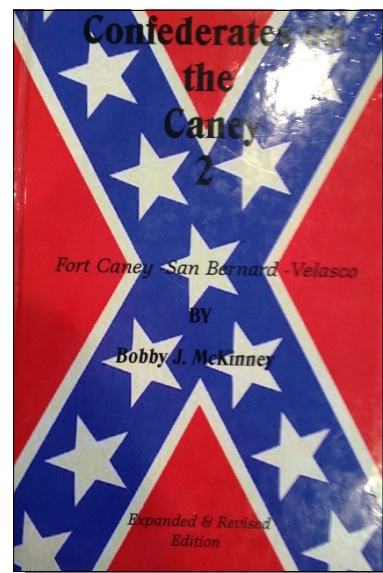
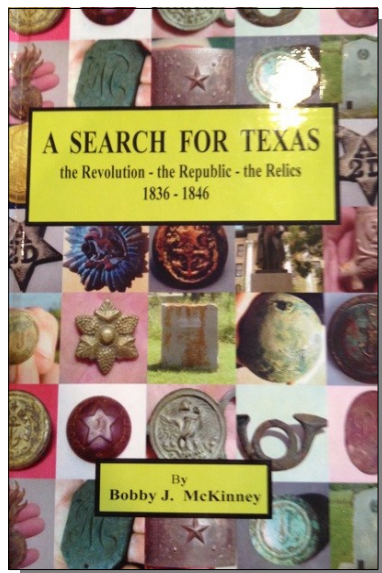
McKINNEY: This is probably about five years of research. During that five-year period, you come across these little pieces of information here and there, and then another year later you come across this book. Then you find a map and you slowly start putting the pieces of the puzzle together. That is basically what historical research is.

It's a continuing thing. You keep on until you can finally come to a conclusion. That's when you start doing the footwork and using a metal detector to see if you can find any evidence of the place you are searching for. Once you find the evidence, you can put the whole story together. That's what we did here. I didn't have a copy of Noah Smithwick's book for years and somebody mentioned it. I had Wharton's book and the other history of Fort Bend County book, but it wasn't nearly as in depth about the Mexicans being here. It took time and a lot of research. I spent many an hour at the George Library with Mr. Von Maszewski. He was really interested in the Civil War with the Waul's Texas Legion. At that time, I was doing research on the Civil War in Fort Bend and Brazoria Counties.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the Wolfram Von-Maszewski's interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=45470>

I like anything about Fort Bend County History, from the 1830s up through the Civil War. That time period just fascinates me.

GOODSILL: Since you made these discoveries, has anyone corroborated them?



McKINNEY: I have other friends that I share information with. I've written two books, *A Search for Texas* which talks about the Mexican Army being here, and *Confederates on the Caney*, which is my Civil War book. I published them, and I've written articles for *The Military Collector & Historian*, *North South Trader's Civil War* magazine, *American Digger* magazine, and *Western & Eastern Treasures* magazine on the hobby, the research and the finds.

The Fort Bend County Museum has a bunch of my artifacts. I've been donating things to the museum for years. The Hill College Texas Heritage Museum in Hillsboro has a research center, and they have artifacts I have given them. I've contributed to several people's collections over the years, including Phil Collins.

GOODSILL: Really! What did you contribute to his collection?

McKINNEY: Let's go to page 307 in his Alamo book and there it is, "various items collected by Bobby McKinney."

GOODSILL: Tell us about this.

McKINNEY: I met Phil several years ago when they were at the San Jacinto Battlegrounds having a private tour. I was invited by a friend of mine. At that time, Phil was still collecting a lot of stuff for his Mexican Army-Alamo collection. I was introduced to him and told him I had artifacts I had found. He said, "Well, I'd love to have some for my collection." I said, "Let's go through and see what you want." So, he has a lot of things found by me, some from Fort Bend County, Wharton County, and Brazoria County, but it is all Mexican Army artifacts. So, this part of a sword that's been broken is now in his collection. I found all of these things.

GOODSILL: (reading) Brown Bess lock plate from Fort Velasco, what does Brown Bess mean?

McKINNEY: That's the kind of musket they had. They were British guns, 69-caliber. That was a lock plate from that type of musket.



*The Brown Bess is a nickname whose origin is lost to history. Its official name was the Land Pattern Musket of the British Army. It was largely obsolete by the 1840s, but continued to be used, notably in the hands of Mexican troops at the Battle of the Alamo in 1836, and by Native American Indian tribes on the frontier in the 1860s. In the image, the lock plate is above the trigger.*

--www.guns.com

A lot of people came to me over the years saying they found this or that, and what is this? Or ask if I would like to buy it. I'm a serious collector of this type of thing and I've had things sold to me, given to me, or been given a lead on where some things might be.

Phil Collins asked us to dig with him at the History Shop right across the street from the Alamo and we helped him with that project. They were down about four feet when they came across a mass of horse shoes. We think it was one of the artillery sites (cannon site) at the Alamo, and they were cutting up horseshoes to use as shrapnel. There were about a five 5-gallon bucket of horseshoes from this site. They



*Relics from the Mexican-Texian War in 1836 that McKinney discovered them during field research using a metal detector*

said, "What are we going to do with them?" I said, "We need to clean them up." They said, "How do you do that?" I said, "Give them to me, and I'll give them back to you in about a month." So, I brought all these horseshoes home with me, got them all cleaned up and gave them back to Phil.

I had worked with Dr. Dimmick at the "Sea of Mud" in Wharton County. I was one of the metal detector archaeologists at San Jacinto for four years. Basically, Dr. Dimmick was responsible for any archaeology done at San Jacinto. The battlefield had never had any archaeology done on it. I think there was some minor work done in the 1970s.

GOODSILL: Tell me about San Jacinto as a site.

McKINNEY: This is where the Texian Army met the Mexican Army and they defeated Santa Anna at San Jacinto in 1836. It's a state park now. Dr. Dimmick got with several people, including Jan Duval. We got permission for a one-day search on the battlefield. There are maps of the battlefield that were drawn in 1836. We used those maps as a guide. We came back with about 150 artifacts; gun parts, musket balls, buttons, buckles and spoons.

GOODSILL: Because not only were they fighting, they were encamped there as well. Do you ever look for artifacts from the Texian Army?

McKINNEY: Oh, yes. Mexican Army, Texian Army, Civil War armies.

GOODSILL: Can you tell the difference between them, such as when you find a button?

McKINNEY: Some look the same because a lot of the uniforms had what you call a flat button, which is just a plain brass button. But you find other artifacts, which can be identified from the Mexican Army or the Texian Army. The Mexican military buttons are quite distinguishable from the U. S. military buttons. Most of the Mexican buttons had numbers on the face of them or had the motif of an eagle with a snake in its mouth.

GOODSILL: The Mexican Army wore uniforms much more than the Texians, right?

McKINNEY: Oh, yes. At some of these Texas camps the volunteers came from different states wearing the military uniform of their state. We found buttons from New York battalion, Georgia battalions, etc.

GOODSILL: What would be the incentive for someone from New York or New England to come down to Texas?

McKINNEY: One thing is land. If you were a volunteer in the Texian Army, you got free land.

GOODSILL: Do you know how that worked?

McKINNEY: I'm not sure exactly how it was distributed, but it was free land for volunteering for the army. When they were doing Spanish land grants, colonist were getting 4,000 to 6,000 acres. They would get a *league* [approximately 4,428 acres] for grazing land and a labor [177 acres] for cropland. If you volunteered for the Texian Army and we won, they would give you land to settle on after the war. So, that was a huge incentive.

GOODSILL: Are any of the names that we see on the old maps names of volunteers?

McKINNEY: Yes. Many of them are of the Old 300.

GOODSILL: These land grants were given before Independence?

McKINNEY: Yes.

GOODSILL: So, is there a map that would show what the volunteers received?



McKINNEY: Not that I know of but I'm sure there are records of it in the archives somewhere. I know if you look at some of the names on the original grant maps, there will be familiar names that you likely have heard before. However, these names were changed on maps updated later when the land was later sold, subdivided and replaced with the new owners' name. I'm sure by 1875 many of the old grant properties had changed hands.

I think that in the 1830's, back in the states, people were trying to get out of the Northeast. They were having a really hard time there, money was tight, jobs were scarce and the U. S. government was still in a financial crisis.

When the Mexican government started offering land in Texas, people came from Illinois, Ohio, New York & etc. Basically, everybody in Texas back then was a Yankee! (laughs) So it was a great incentive to get free land.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In 1833, President Andrew Jackson drained federal funds from the Second Bank of the US and gave them to state banks in areas that supported him for reelection. When he issued the Coinage Act of 1836, an executive order that all government land had to be bought with gold or silver, banks called in loans and halted discounts. Property values fell. The Panic of 1837 ensued. New president, Martin Van Buren, chose not to intervene and numerous businesses failed. The depression lasted until 1842.

--www.Googlebooks.com

There was ample reason to "Go west, young man, Go west."

--attributed to John Babsone Lane Soule in the Terre Haute Express in 1851

GOODSILL: The length of the battle for independence from Mexico spanned what years?

McKINNEY: It started in 1835 with the Battle of San Antonio, where Ben Milam was killed. If you go back to 1832, there was the Battle of Velasco, at the Mexican fort near the mouth of the Brazos River, so it had been building up for several years.

GOODSILL: So, let's say the first major battle was in 1835 and it ended when?

McKINNEY: In April 1836, when the Texian army defeated the Mexican army and captured Santa Anna at San Jacinto. They brought Santa Anna to Velasco and I think they put him on board the *Independence*, which was one of the Texas Navy ships. They were going to send him back to Mexico. However, General Tom Green came down there and stopped his return. They were fanatical about Santa Anna not leaving Texas. They wanted something done about him.

So, that's when they took him to the Phelps Plantation, which was called *Orozimbo*. It belonged to Dr. Phelps and was in Brazoria County. They kept Santa Anna there, and he ended up in Washington, D. C. They actually wined and dined him at the White House, and he was well received. I think he took a ship out of New York and went back to Mexico. He became president again, and we fought him again in the Mexican-American War [1846-1848] after Texas had been admitted to the Union. Up until 1845-1846, they were still feuding with Mexico. William Kinchen Davis of Richmond was one of the Mier expedition survivors.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the Virginia Davis Scarborough (2011) interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytx.gov/home/showdocument?id=30494>

This was where the men drew beans to see who lived and who died. A white bean meant you lived, and the black bean meant you were shot. When Texas became a state, the United States said it was time to settle this thing with Texas and Mexico once and for all. So, they did. The U. S. ended up with territory that later became New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

GOODSILL: From your research and your metal-detecting, is there anything in particular you learned about the 1836 war or the skirmishes?

McKINNEY: I suppose one thing we found out that we didn't realize before was that some of the Mexican Army soldiers were still wearing old and outdated Mexican uniforms from a previous empire. Another thing we found out was that the Mexicans were also using copper as well as lead musket balls. Sometimes it's the little things that get your attention.

GOODSILL: Does clothing survive? Boots or things like that?

McKINNEY: Some leather survives. We've found parts of boots and shoes such as metal boot heel plates. This kept them from wearing out the heels of their shoes or boots.

GOODSILL: How deep under the ground are these things?

McKINNEY: It all depends on the location.

GOODSILL: Over time, do metal artifacts tend to go deeper underground, or do they come up closer to the surface?

McKINNEY: If it's a plowed field, they can get deep. If it is near a riverbank or a creek that floods, it can get fairly deep. So, it depends on the location and the type of soil (clay or sand). For the most part, most of the things we've found in and around Fort Bend County and Brazoria County have been no deeper than 18 inches and most of it was about 8 inches. When we were at San Jacinto, we found a BGo (Battalion Guerrero) breastplate from the Mexican Army. It was almost two feet deep.

GOODSILL: Was this something a regular soldier would wear or an officer?

McKINNEY: This would be the oval brass medallion that was attached to a shoulder belt and worn by most of their elite battalions. I think the Guerrero Battalion really took a beating at the Alamo.

GOODSILL: Do you know anything about the conditions when the Mexicans were coming up to Texas to have these battles? It was winter, wasn't it?

McKINNEY: Yes, it was winter. These guys are walking from Mexico and they are beaten down. They were like Sherman's Army; surviving off the land. If you read de la Peña's diary, when they were camped in Richmond, they were saying that you can't get a tortilla for a peso. That was like a dollar. There was no food; these guys were literally starving. Some had no shoes and their clothes were ragged. When they were forced to leave Texas, they left Richmond and went to Elizabeth Powell's property near Kendleton, and they camped there. Then it started raining, and when they reached East Bernard it was pouring down a heavy rain. It was so muddy they couldn't cross the San Bernard River, and they were trapped. Dr. Dimmock's book talks about the "Sea of Mud". Right now, that area is all rice fields in East Bernard.

GOODSILL: Has there been any archaeological work done in that area?

McKINNEY: Yes. Dr. Dimmick did a lot of work there. They found five or six rare, brass howitzer shells from the Mexican Army. They only used the howitzer cannons at the Alamo, and only one other known howitzer shell was found at the Alamo.

They were loaded on their supply wagons. It rained so hard that the Mexicans were throwing supplies off their wagons to lighten the load. If you've ever been out there in those rice fields when it is muddy, you bog up to your knees. The Mexicans had a huge wagon train, which probably went for several miles, and they were carrying all kinds of supplies with them. But when they got into the "sea of mud", they bogged down to the wagon axles and to the horses' bellies.

GOODSILL: So, they lost the battle, they are retreating toward home, they are taking all their things with them, and now they are mired in the mud?

McKINNEY: Right. They started lightening the loads by throwing all this stuff off the wagons. Dr. Dimmick found a trail of gun parts and other stuff from the Mexican Army for about four miles. Then they finally hit high ground and the trail was lost because they stopped throwing things off the wagons.

GOODSILL: What animals were pulling the wagons?

McKINNEY: Mostly mules probably. They found a lot of mule shoes. De la Peña mentions that they aren't following behind each other. They are walking in a line but spread out. Otherwise you are walking in the hole made by the guy in front of you; you want "fresh" mud to walk in!

De la Peña was an officer in the Mexican Army and he has a great account of Fort Bend County and what was going on here during the retreat. It is a vivid account. If you want to read about the Texas Revolution in this area, that would be the book. It's called "*With Santa Anna in Texas*". That was one of my research guides.

GOODSILL: It's a very interesting, cautionary tale about what happens when you go into battle in a far-off land, trying to protect something that is outside of your territory. You have to get there, you have to fight, and you need supplies.

McKINNEY: You are on the other guy's ball field. Then you've got to get home, and you are walking.

GOODSILL: If you win, you've got to defend that territory.

McKINNEY: Exactly. There was a lot of controversy after Santa Anna's defeat at San Jacinto because some of the Mexican officers, such as Urrea, Sesma and Gaona, said they needed to go rescue the president. They still had a huge army with them – 3,000-4,000 soldiers. They could have EASILY marched on to San Jacinto and confronted the Texian Army and overpowered them. But Santa Anna's order to his generals was to leave Texas.

GOODSILL: Do we think now that was a tactical mistake on his part?

McKINNEY: I'm sure it was. (laughter) But orders were orders. Santa Anna had a lot of clout. You didn't disobey him.

GOODSILL: I notice the way you pronounce his name, "Sant-y" Anna.

McKINNEY: That's just my southern drawl!

GOODSILL: Where are you from?

McKINNEY: I moved to Richmond when I was three months old. But I was born above Waco, in Meridian, Texas. My parents moved down here in 1951. Tiny Gaston is my second cousin. My grandmother was a Gaston. In the late 1940s, the Gaston brothers all moved to Richmond. They told my mom and daddy they needed to move to Richmond. So, they did.

GOODSILL: What started your interest in this history?

McKINNEY: I had four great-great grandfathers who fought in the Civil War, for the South, proudly I say. Two of them were McKinney's, one of them a Gaston, and the other was a Shepherd. I knew my great grandfather on the Gaston side. His name was Raz Gaston. He died when he was 95 or 96. When I was a kid, I would sometimes hear him talk about his daddy, my great-great grandfather, who was in the 11th Texas Cavalry, during the Civil War. He said that his dad surrendered with his brother in Bentonville, North Carolina, and they walked back to Texas. They talked about all the things they encountered in getting back to Texas. There were still hostilities on-going. No food, no shelter. I think they had a mule as a pack mule.

They said every time you came to a bridge you had to fight a Yankee to go across the bridge. All the big bridges were either burned or rebuilt, or there were now temporary ferries there. So much of the South was destroyed. It was a huge ordeal just to get back home. I remember my great-grandmother, Mattie Gaston, Raz's wife, talking about Reconstruction.

GOODSILL: What did she say about Reconstruction?

McKINNEY: She talked about how hard Reconstruction was. It was just horrible. First of all, if you were an ex-Confederate soldier, you weren't allowed to vote in a lot of places or hold public office. Northerners or Carpetbaggers were running both the local and state governments throughout Texas and you were disrespected and treated badly by them.

GOODSILL: You were on the losing side and you were *persona non grata*?

McKINNEY: Right. Now your hometown, your home state, is being run by somebody else, a new government. It's not being run by you or by people with your beliefs, but by people with no idea of your past livelihood. These Yanks had worked in shops and stores, and you had always been a farmer. They knew nothing about farming, mules, plows, or seed.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The term carpetbagger, used exclusively as a pejorative term, originated from the carpet bags (a form of cheap luggage made from carpet fabric) which many of these newcomers carried. In the history of the United States, a carpetbagger was any person from the Northern United States who came to the Southern states after the American Civil War and was perceived to be exploiting the local populace for their own purposes.

-- Wikipedia.



You had to start over. And many people lost their land and their property during Reconstruction. You never hear about it, but there were homeless ex-slaves all about. There are several good books that address these issues. One of them is called *True Stories of Old Houston and Houstonians* by Dr. Samuel Oliver Young, published in 1913. He gives all these anecdotes and talks about Reconstruction in Houston and how hard it was, even for people in Houston.

So, Reconstruction was really a hard time on southern people. I found one button from the State Police on a plantation in Brazoria. Governor E. J. Davis created a police force to keep himself in power. They went to the polls and said, "Blacks vote first and whites vote last. Polls close at 4:00." Yankees/Northerners voted first. They would ask where you were from, and if you were from the North, you could vote. If you were from Texas or the South, the polls were closed. He stayed in power like that for about four years, until 1873.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Governor Davis was elected Governor for a four-year term- 1869 to 1873. He was not re-elected.

The State Police harassed everyone who was a Southerner and made sure that the polls were slanted. They burned Brenham in 1866. There is a book on the burning of Brenham. They were chasing after a man and one of the black soldiers kicked over a lamp or threw it in a building trying to burn him out. It caught the whole town on fire. The town sued the federal government until 1908. But no funds were ever provided, so they lost. But there were a lot of things like that that went on all over Texas.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Civil War Reconstruction - Much of the Southern United States was destroyed during the Civil war. Farms and plantations were burned down and their crops destroyed. Also, many people had Confederate money which was now worthless and the local governments were in disarray. The South needed to be rebuilt. Many people wanted the South to be punished for trying to leave the Union. Other people, however, wanted to forgive the South and let the healing of the nation begin. President Abraham Lincoln wanted to be lenient to the South and make it easy for southern states to rejoin the Union. He said that any southerner who took an oath to the Union would be given a pardon. He also said that if 10% of the voters in a state supported the Union, then a state could be readmitted. Under Lincoln's plan, any state that was readmitted must make slavery illegal as part of their constitution. President Lincoln was assassinated at the end of the Civil War, however, and never had the chance to implement his Reconstruction plan. When Andrew Johnson became president, he was from the South and wanted to be even more lenient to the Confederate States than Lincoln. Congress disagreed and began to pass harsher laws for the Southern states.

--[www.ducksters.com](http://www.ducksters.com)

GOODSILL: Since you've written a book about the Civil War, what is the focus of your book?

McKINNEY: Basically, it is about Fort Bend County and Brazoria County during the Civil War and the action going on at the coast on Caney Creek which is in Sargent, Texas. I used to go to the library over here and got into what they called 'The Official Records of the War of Rebellion'. These were books published in the 1880s. They took all this correspondence from the Civil War and published it - all the letters written to the Colonels and Captains, those in charge of Confederate government operations, and all the information passed by foot. They bound it and sectioned it off into the different states such as Arizona, Louisiana, Texas, etc., and all the different theaters of war. I think there are 130 volumes on the Army and 80 volumes on the Navy. You can go into those official records and look at the reports these guys are writing. I got into them and they started talking about Caney Creek. There were Confederates at Caney Creek. I used to go fishing at Caney Creek!

I took my metal detector and went down there one day. I went across the Inter-coastal Canal and headed east at the beach. I didn't find anything for about a mile except a few fired 20 MM shells from World War II. They used the area as a bombing range. So, I came back to the mouth of Caney Creek and I walked about an eighth of a mile. As I looked down, there were these little iron balls laying everywhere. They were canister shot, fired from the Federal Navy gunboats that bombarded the forts at Caney Creek.

GOODSILL: How did you know that? How can you look at a ball and tell that it is from the Civil War?

McKINNEY: I'll tell you. First you must be proficient in the study of Civil War artillery shells, which I am. Second, there are some gun boat reports. We know what kind of ordnance they are firing at the Confederate batteries at Caney because they are saying so in their official reports. These are 11-inch Dahlgren shells and they had these small iron balls inside of them. When they exploded, all the shrapnel and small iron balls flew everywhere. This is an anti-personnel bomb similar to a hand grenade. Third, I am standing on the exact site of the old Civil War fort, so putting this all together, it was obvious to me what I was looking at.

This is a Yankee boat, writing their official account: (reading) "February 6, 1864: Saw dismasted schooner under battery at Caney Creek. Took in all sail and commenced firing at battery, which returned our fire. Expended five 11-inch shrapnel and twelve shrapnel shell; thirteen 24-pounder howitzer shrapnel, and twenty-five 20-pounder rifle shell.

Fore topmast stay and fore guy shot away. February 7th, 9:30 a.m.: While passing the rebel battery at Caney Creek, was fired upon, two passing over us. February 8th: While passing San Bernard, was fired upon by a battery of three guns. I returned fire. February 9th: In company of the *Aroostook*, attacked the batteries at Velasco and San Bernard. Found six guns, about 32-pounders, 33 hundredweight. I should judge that Velasco had three 12-pounders at San Bernard. We anchored off Caney Creek that night. The battery at Caney has one 30-pounder Parrott, four 32-pounders 33 hundredweight and should judge a force of about 4,000-5,000 troops there."(finished reading)

So this stuff is lying on the ground, in the clay. There are big pieces of cannonball fragments lying around there also. Later on, I found a Civil War map drawn by Colonel Ashbel Smith of the actual fort that I found. He's got a picture of it, a map drawing of it. I found the fort site in 1988, and now it has literally washed away. Caney Creek down there at Sargent is in a very bad area for currents. This fort was probably about a quarter of a mile inland, during the Civil War. When I found it, it was right on the beach. That shows the amount of erosion of this area.

GOODSILL: Were any of your relatives at Caney Creek?

McKINNEY: No. Mine all fought east of the Mississippi, in Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina.



GOODSILL: Do you have records or diaries from them?

McKINNEY: Yes. I've got all their Civil War records. I've got one record of Mordecai McKinney, which came out of the family Bible that belonged to his brother or uncle. He was killed at Shiloh in April of 1862.

GOODSILL: Are you going to do anything with those records?

McKINNEY: I haven't. I have files and files of information on different Texas regiments and where they were. It's just research material. I have people calling me asking if I've heard of a certain camp or regiment. Everything relates to Texas. I don't fool with anything Civil War that's not related to Texas. That's my interest.

GOODSILL: What part of the county did your forefathers come back to after the war?

McKINNEY: They all ended up in Bosque County, which is northwest of Waco.

GOODSILL: So, it was those Gastons who came down to Fort Bend County.

McKINNEY: Yes. The Gastons came out of Mississippi, settled in Grayson County, and finally moved to Bosque County where they settled in the 1870s. The McKinneys did, too.

MATTHEWS: My great-grandfather was in the 20th Texas Infantry, Galveston. I have a replica of the flag in my garage. (laughing)

McKINNEY: I have a couple of hat stars from the 20th. I collect hat stars with Congressman Culberson. We started collecting Texas hat stars about three years ago and we have a huge collection.

GOODSILL: What is a hat star?

MATTHEWS: Company star.

McKINNEY: It was a star shaped insignia that soldiers attached to their hat. It was a Texas thing. Some of them are really fancy, and some of them are just a plain star. Some have their regimental number engraved in it. Some were made by jewelers or sutlers, and some were made by the soldier himself.

GOODSILL: Is this the kind of thing that you buy as opposed to finding in the ground?

EDITOR'S NOTE: A sutler made a business of "suttlng," or supplying food, and an assortment of other articles to the troops. He was a dry-goods dealer, a grocer, and provided other necessities that were likely to be called for in the service of the soldiers. His chief profession was keeping a stock of goods that answered the demands of the stomach. His line of canned goods were used mostly for the officers' messes. The art of canning meats, fruits and vegetables was almost unheard of at the time.

--<http://www.tngenweb.org/campbell/hist-bogan/CivilWarSutler.html>

McKINNEY: Both. For the most part, most of the things we collect are artifacts that have been found. However, we have got some hat stars that have been passed down by the family since the Civil War. I like the ones that have been found because it really shows their age. There is a lot of fake stuff out there.

GOODSILL: How do you authenticate a piece when you find it?

McKINNEY: One thing is when you've been digging things out of the ground as long as I have – I've been doing this since about 1977 – you know what an artifact looks like after it's been in the ground for years. You see how it has aged; you see its patina. You see how dirt bonds to it. You know the look as it ages. That's what I go by. You can't fake patina. I've seen how people try to do it, but it just shows. You have to train yourself.

Many people have bought lots of fake Civil War stuff. It's like anything else. The more you do it, the more familiar you become with it. I have probably 3,000-4,000 books at my house. All of them have to do with research, metal detecting, the Civil War, the Republic of Texas, the Mexican Army, Indians, gun parts, cannonballs, cannons, uniforms, buttons, bullets, belt buckles, forts and skirmish sites and all other things that is Texas history related.

GOODSILL: What is your succession plan for these items when you are gone?

McKINNEY: I don't know.

GOODSILL: Do you have kids?

McKINNEY: Yes.

GOODSILL: Are they interested?

McKINNEY: Not really. I've donated a lot of stuff over the years, and I've been approached many times by numerous people who want to buy my entire collection. I had my first collection on display at the George Library for about 3 and one-half years. It was both Mexican Army and Civil War artifacts: Belt buckles, buttons, musket balls, mini balls, cannon balls, and bottles. I had it on display with Von-Maszewski, and it was going to be there for three months. It stayed for 3-1/2 years because they had people come in from everywhere looking at that collection. It's not a collection you could see just anywhere.

If you go up into Virginia and to Civil War battlefields, they have huge collections of what they call "dug artifacts". In Texas, that stuff doesn't exist. There are no collections of excavated artifacts like there are in the north and the northeast.

GOODSILL: That's because there weren't many battles down here, and the Mexican battle was a very short time period.

McKINNEY: That's right! It's just not out there.

Then the University of Saint Thomas in Houston, or rather Father Bader, came to look at my collection. He said they were doing a big Civil War thing at the university, and he asked if I would consider putting my collection on display there for a while. I agreed. I took it out of the library and put it on display at St. Thomas for about three months. Von wasn't very happy about it.

Somebody saw it and said, "Mr. McKinney, we would love to have your collection." I wasn't sure about doing that, but they made an offer I couldn't refuse.

GOODSILL: Was it hard for you to give up your babies?

McKINNEY: It was. It went into a private collection.

GOODSILL: Did you like that?

McKINNEY: Yes, because I know this man's collection goes far and wide to other collections. Some of it is at J. P. Bryan Museum right now.

GOODSILL: Are you satisfied that it gets seen?

McKINNEY: Oh, yes. This is a learning process for the general public of Texas. When I went to high school, we heard about the Civil War being in the East. I heard the name Sam Houston, but I didn't know about the Republic of Texas. I knew about Santa Anna and San Jacinto, and that was the extent of it. When I got into my personal research, the sky just opened and poured forth Texas history. I didn't know there were plantations in Fort Bend and Brazoria County. I didn't know they had Civil War camps on basically every plantation here. They had guard camps because these plantations were selling food crops, supplies such as lumber, leather and fodder to the Confederate government. The plantation owners were afraid that northern sympathizers might sabotage their property, burn their sawmills or grain crops. So, they petitioned General Magruder to put guards on their property.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Brigadier General John Bankhead Magruder, after mixed success in the east, was reassigned to command of the District of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona for the Confederacy. He assumed command on November 29, 1862. From his headquarters in Houston, Magruder ably administered his department, despite occasional clashes with the governor. His greatest success was his brilliant recapture of Galveston on January 1863, and the consequent, if temporary, dispersal of the Union blockading fleet (see the Battle of Galveston elsewhere on the attributed website below). On August 17, 1864, he was briefly transferred to command the Department of Arkansas. On March 31, 1865, Confederate president Jefferson Davis returned Magruder to Texas but only in time to witness the surrender of the Trans-Mississippi Department at Galveston on June 2, 1865. After the war Magruder offered his sword to Emperor Maximilian of Mexico. After the collapse of the imperial forces he returned to Texas to make his home in Houston, where he died on February 19, 1871.

--<https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fma15>

You'll find Civil War artifacts all over these plantations down here. They had troops here just about the entire time of the war. But I never knew about this until I did my own research. I've researched everything I can about Richmond. There was a Civil War camp where the Travis Building is. There was a Louisiana belt buckle and three or four CSA (Confederate States Army) buttons found there. They were down here at Morton's Ferry on Preston Street. They were camped all over Richmond, including right here by the railroad bridge, where the sewer plant is. There was a gun emplacement there during the Civil War. They found several cannon balls there when the sewer plant was being built. Here in Rosenberg, at the location of Deaf Smith Elementary School on Lamar Drive, when they were building it in 1973 or 1974, they uncovered cannon balls from the Mexican Army.

GOODSILL: Did any of your research change your understanding of the Texas Revolution? Or did it confirm it?

McKINNEY: It confirmed a lot of what I had read. I just see the hardship of it. The Runaway Scrape for example; people leaving their homes and all their possessions behind in fear of the Mexican Army in 1836. We've come across places where you can still see burn marks where they burned their houses. When they came back, they had nothing left and had to start over. You have to understand the hardships, especially the Old 300, and everybody from that time. If you didn't work, you didn't eat. It was very, very hard.

After the war, everything was destroyed, your livestock was all gone, your crops had been destroyed or taken, you had nothing except what you have on your back. You had to start all over. It was a community effort to get started again, neighbor helped neighbor.

GOODSILL: Did any of your research change your understanding of the Texas Revolution? Or did it confirm it?

McKINNEY: Yes, both! The end of any war is the time to rebuild because of the overall destruction that has been left behind. Some of those old families in Richmond faced both. Richmond is rich in history, and if you know where to look, you can still find Civil War artifacts.

GOODSILL: Getting harder, though, with all the construction going on?

McKINNEY: Sometimes construction sites uncover things for a while, and then cover it up again. One of the things I've learned to do is just look on the ground. I guess you train your eye to look for what doesn't look like it belongs. I've found clay pipes in Richmond, just laying on top of the ground. I've found mini balls, little brass buckles, porcelain doll legs, clay marbles – all of it just lying on top of the ground.

MATTHEWS: Can I revert back to Thompson's' Ferry for a minute? We never did say how far down it is from downtown.

McKINNEY: It's on the river.

MATTHEWS: But down the river?

GOODSILL: It's just north of downtown Richmond.

MATTHEWS: Is it past the railroad tracks?

McKINNEY: This is 1865 (looking at a map). The railroad tracks were here in 1865. This was the old Buffalo Bayou, Brazos & Colorado Railroad in 1865. Here is downtown Richmond, and here are the railroad tracks. Pultar Road, the State School is back over here, the new George baseball park is right in there. If Pultar Road ran straight to the river, that's where Thompsons Ferry was in 1836. The Mexican Army came to Richmond from Elizabeth Powell's property. They were camped at her house. They were coming from San Felipe and from down below, and they congregated at her house. They came into Richmond from this way. They came to Morton's Ferry first, and then on to Thompson's Ferry where they later crossed the river on their way to San Jacinto.

GOODSILL: Oh, they go north and then east?

McKINNEY: There's an account from Dr. Hunter who lived above Richmond that the Mexicans crossed by his house at night. He didn't have any lights on so they couldn't see his house when they crossed Jones Creek, going to San Jacinto. Of course, Old Richmond Road is right up here somewhere.

GOODSILL: This is the path of the Runaway Scrape?

McKINNEY: Yes. This is Fulshear back over here, and there's a road coming here.

GOODSILL: So, the Mexicans were converging from the north and from the south.

EDITOR'S NOTE: There are numerous references to *The Runaway Scrape* in literature including a painting by Henry Arthur McArdle in the [San Jacinto Museum of History](#). Google *The Runaway Scrape* for useful links.

McKINNEY: Yes. People talk about the Texas and Mexican Army doing a lot of trailblazing. Actually, by 1836, there is basically a road everywhere you want to go. The Indians used the cow trails, and when the settlers came in, they turned the cow trails into roads. By 1836 you could go anywhere you wanted to. And by 1865, they had that many more. Even when the Confederates were in this area, they were not trail blazing. They are coming right off the roads. That's how we found these camps because we knew where the roads were. They camped where there was high ground, water, and shade. From where we're sitting right now, is probably less than two miles to where Thompson's Ferry is.

MATTHEWS: I have one more question. At the meeting the other day, there was talk about the monument, and that's the first I've heard of it.

McKINNEY: The one that's in their yard?

GOODSILL: There's a Thompson's Ferry marker. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

McKINNEY: I have a picture of the marker in one of my books. It's on private property of the Lindsey family, in their front yard. This is it, right here.

MATTHEWS: Can it be relocated to the actual site?

McKINNEY: I don't know. There is a lot of private property there and I think they are dredging soil out of it now. They could put it at the end of Pultar Road, but I guess it would have to be on City or County property. Somebody was asking me about those markers. I did a lot of research on those markers, but a lot of the records from the 1936 markers got lost. From what I found out, in 1910 they were getting ready for the 1936 100th anniversary of Texas Independence. They were interviewing everybody; some of these people were 80, 90, 100 years old in 1910, and they interviewed them by the thousands. They wrote down everything they could remember about the Revolution, the Republic, where people lived, where a battle was, where the Indians killed someone.

When they put those 1936 markers down, they put them on private property, state property, city property – they put them all over. The point was it wasn't just for tourists to see. It was to forever mark THAT SPOT where that event happened, whether the public sees it or not. It really upsets me to see people move these markers. If you do the research, you will see the markers are right on top of the place they commemorate.

The one for Elizabeth Powell is right there at her house! Dr. Dimmick found Mexican Army artifacts within five feet of the marker. On the 1955 U. S. Geological Map, it shows the original marker site for Jane Long's home, which later was moved to Randall Jones property over here. It's since been moved again onto land that once belonged to her near the new Hutchinson Elementary School. At least the Jane Long marker now resides closer to her original home.

GOODSILL: Is there anything on your bucket list that you haven't done that you hope to do?

McKINNEY: I'm always doing research, and I'm always looking for new sites to metal detect. This is my hobby; this is my passion. It's a life-long thing. I shall continue to do what I do until I can't do it anymore. But on the professional side of things, I also work with several archaeological firms and I do metal detecting for them. I'm working with Janet Wagner right now on some different sites in Tomball, such as Spring Creek Park.

The City acquired an old cemetery there that goes back before the Civil War. It was abandoned sometime in the 1930s, and the County bought the property. By law, they have to reestablish the cemetery. Of course, all the markers are gone. We've been doing metal detecting there. When we began doing metal detecting where the cemetery was, we started finding gun parts that go back to the 1750s, to maybe the English or Spanish. We also found Indian sites in there. So, whether it be private or professional, my search for Texas continues.

GOODSILL: Is there anything you wanted to talk about that we haven't gotten to?

McKINNEY: No, just that I have my two books! (laughter)

GOODSILL: Are they for sale?

McKINNEY: Actually, they are both out of print. I did 2,000 copies of that one and reprinted another 1,000, and they are all gone. I just got an e-mail from Dr. Dimmick. He forwarded to me, that someone in San Antonio is looking for a copy of that book, and it's out of print. When they reprint them, I would like to do another book, a third one.

These books are kind of an archaeological guide to artifacts; identification and research, along with the information. I like showing pictures of artifacts. Then you can compare something you have found with the picture in the book.

Interview ends