

# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewee: **Dianne Hall Wilson**

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*Transcript*

GOODSILL: I am interviewing Dianne Hall Wilson who is the Fort Bend County Clerk. We are doing a series on how government works.

WILSON: I will begin at the beginning and come through the 32 years I've been the County Clerk. I was elected in November of 1982 and took office January 1, 1983. At that time there was a small office for the County Clerk over in the historic County Courthouse. There were 18 employees, today I have four locations with 70 employees. Our mission and vision has definitely expanded not because I wanted to expand but because the duties have expanded. At the time I became County Clerk we had one court and now we have five; with that we've had to increase staff.

Back then I was in real estate sales and management. I was involved with the Republican Party and they needed a candidate for County Clerk. A friend of mine who was really involved with the Republican Party said, "Dianne you're a manager, you know real estate. We need a County Clerk." I said, "I really don't know what a County Clerk does, other than we went to the County Clerk's office to get our marriage license. And I know they handle property records, but other than that I know nothing." He said, "That's okay we just need a candidate." (chuckling) Anyway, I won. I took office and I spent the first year understanding and memorizing the laws. And I set up an organizational chart. A vendor, who used to be a County Clerk, happened to see the organizational chart on my desk. "I have never seen a government office, a County Clerk's office, with an organizational chart." I said, "Well I can't operate without one. I need to know who does what and who's responsible for what." He said, "I am very impressed."

The first thing I did was start going through all the records. I was appalled at the condition of the records. For the first 90 days we wore gloves and masks and we used Formula 409 and other cleaning solutions to get the mold and mildew off of the old books. They were moldy and mildewed because the Courthouse wasn't air-conditioned or heated in any consistent way. The other thing was that they had the records down in the basement of the Courthouse, and it was a dirt floors. They were actually sending the public down there to look at records. I found dead animals, I don't even know what some of the animals were! I found records stuffed up under the eaves of the basement.

For my first six months in office my husband thought I was elected to be janitor because I was coming home so filthy. My eyes were swelling shut because of the mold and mildew and no telling what else. Between drops in my eyes and masks and gloves and 409; trying to just figure out what the laws were; what we were doing; why we were doing it and how to make it better ... what a year. I am a very organized person and I



wanted everything in a professional, understandable, keep-it-simple-stupid method. I was sitting on the floor cleaning books, going through old probate records that had been folded and crammed into long pullout drawers. I don't remember how long they were; probably a foot long, and they had folded the probate records and stuck them in there. I realized these things are going to disintegrate if I tried to unfold them so a lot of them we could not unfold. We had to leave them alone and box them so that the public wouldn't try to unfold them because of the way the paper was. They were literally like little butterflies just disintegrating.

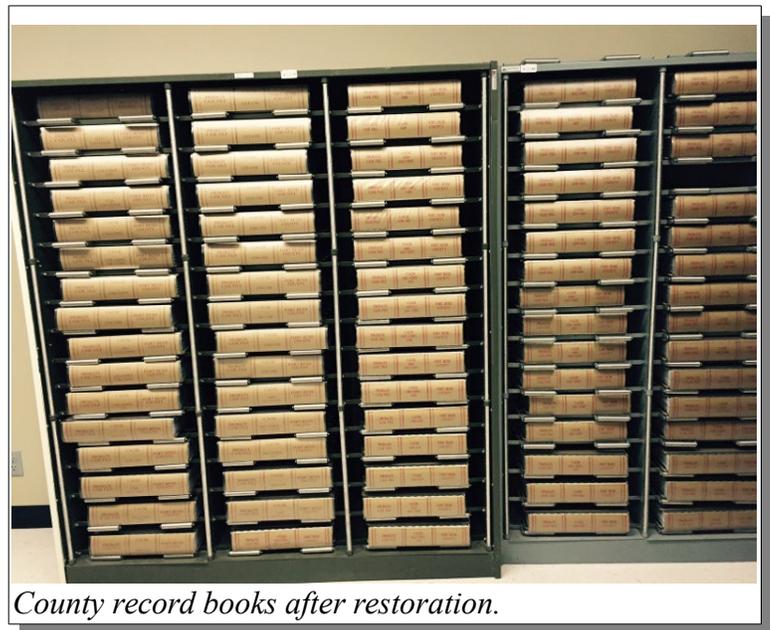


I was sitting on the floor and going through these probate papers and this gentleman walked up and said, "Is there anyone that works here that can help me?" I said, "I can help you." He asked a real estate question and I knew the answer because I had been in real estate. "I haven't met you before, you must be new here." I had probably been there a month and I said, "Yeah, I'm the newly elected County Clerk."

He just looked at me and said, “YOU are the County Clerk and you are sitting on the floor going through records?” Still sitting there, I hadn’t moved, I said, “Let me put it this way, I don’t ask my staff to do something I am not willing to do.” He was surprised and he said, “Well I have never seen an elected official sitting on the floor doing the work like that.” I said, “Welcome to the new world.” I have kept to my motto to this day. If I am walking from my car to the building and I see paper on the ground, I pick it up. Because this is my building this is my county. I am a taxpayer too. Just because I am an elected official doesn’t mean that I am above anything.

About two weeks later I had an attorney walk in and say, “You have made more changes in two months that I have seen in 20 years and I don’t like it.” “Well sir, I tell you what, you come back in six months and tell me whether you like it or not. What you don’t like we’ll sit down and talk about.” He did come back in six months and he said, “It’s the best run office in the state and I applaud what you have been doing.” Since then he has been a true believer and a good friend.

One of the things that appalled me was that I found a five-drawer cabinet filled with property documents and records that had money and coins and checks attached to them, that had never been recorded. They dated back to probably the early or mid-1900s. I said, “What are these?” They said, “When people don’t send enough money for the fee we just put it in there and wait until they send us enough money.” I said, “Most of these people are probably dead by now. I want every one of these documents recorded, if the checks don’t clear too bad, if there’s not enough money, too bad. Just receive it, get these documents recorded. This is chain of title, folks, you have messed up the chain of title. You can’t ever do that!” I put a policy in place, you either accept it and record it or you reject it immediately and return it. To this day we follow that. In fact I got a law passed that says that a clerk shall accept and record or reject and return.



I have written a lot of laws over my 32 years and have gotten them passed. That one didn't even make sense, why would you keep somebody's document and not record it? Anyway we got all these recorded. I still have a few of them that I saved and when I go give speeches I show them to people. I'll have to bring them out for you. We found thousands of marriage licenses that had never been returned to the couple because the couple moved between the time they got it and when it was recorded. They were three and four months behind in recording. You have to return the license to the couple.

The sad thing on these marriage licenses is that I can not give the marriage license to the daughter or granddaughter of one of these couples because the laws says you must return it to the couple. Well if the couple is dead what do you do with the marriage license? I cannot give them away but I can loan them. So I have permanently loaned them to the Fort Bend Museum. We took images of them first. I didn't know what else to do with them. I didn't want to destroy them.

GOODSILL: What is involved with recording a document?

WILSON: It's changed over time. In 1983 a person had to bring or mail in a document. The clerk had to determine that it was in the right county and that it was a recordable document, meaning that it's clear, it's legible, and it had a party name to it. Then they would put a file stamp on it, make a copy of it on microfilm and eventually return the original, sometimes weeks down the road, to the owner. The microfilm was available for the public to look at. The office has never kept the originals. Even when everything was hand written in the books the original always went back to the owner. Which is kind of unique in Texas because some states, even Louisiana to this day, keep the original. They don't give the original back to the owner.

When Steven F. Austin was an Empresario he was the first to record in a book the land records. He would record that he sold the land to this person and then he would give them the original deed. Prior to a County Clerk's office being established in 1836 the person had to carry their deed around with them. If they lost it or it burned or it got stolen they had no way to prove that they were the owner. Steven F. Austin essentially was the first County Clerk in that he recorded these documents and he would provide another copy if they needed it. I was privileged to go to the General Land Office a couple of years ago and with gloves on to open and touch the original book where Steven F. Austin wrote people's names and descriptions (in metes and bounds) of what they had purchased.

GOODSILL: So recording is actually creating a record of a legal transaction?

WILSON: Correct. It's a notice to the public. It is the public's business what is happening in their county. It's absolutely necessary for multiple purposes. Number one, you don't want anything done in secret. You want to know that the land next to you is going to be used for something or is being bought by somebody. Secondly, government knows about it and can regulate land usage if necessary. And they know who owns that land for tax purposes so there is your tax base. They needed a central office for each county, which is why the County Clerk's office was established. It is in the Texas constitution.

We took in all the records that pertained to land and birth and death and marriage, Commissioners Court and the court. It was a central repository of documents and information for the public to refer to. Every Courthouse had to be centrally located so that it was no more than one-day's horse ride from the outer most regions of the county. That's how a county seat got selected.

In 1983 when I came into office everything was being done through vendors. You would give them the document and they would microfilm it for you. The error rate was astounding. I was appalled. And the way they indexed it was not always correct. I didn't think the microfilm image was all that clear times. So I went to Commissioner's Court and got \$100,000 to create my own microfilm department. We did that from 1984 to 1994. For ten years we microfilmed all the records in-house. That was really beneficial because we had total control over the condition and the indexing of the records. In 1993 some gentlemen had a fist fight here in the office trying to access the same roll of film. I said, "There has got to be a better way. If we can all watch the same TV channel and we can all see the same news on TV then there has got to be a way to put documents on a computer."

So I started researching. I found that digital imaging was available. I went to the Legislature and got a special fee dedicated for this purpose, its called The Records Management Fee. The County Clerks sets the fee up to \$5.00 per document filed. Currently we bring in over a million dollars a year on that fee. We buy computers, upgrade our software, and use it to manage the records.

When we started the imaging system it took up a huge wall, probably ten or twelve feet long, and the disks were as big as dinner plates. An electronic arm had to find that disk and bring it over, kind of like a jukebox. A monster jukebox and it cost \$800,000. Within two years that jukebox got replaced with small towers of computers connected together. Today, the digital storage system is about the size of a small refrigerator and there are computer servers that go into these racks and instantly your see these documents.

That's how fast technology has moved and now it's going into the cloud. Right now my documents go through the cloud to Indianapolis as back up to the digital image system. If we have a fire or tornado or hurricane the Web is up 24-7, it's never down, for the public to access the documents. The public has the right to access all public documents at all times.

GOODSILL: All marriage records all deed record all birth records

WILSON: Everything, if it's public record it's out on the web. Birth and death records are not public records. I put everything out on the web in July of 2000. I got highly criticized by a lot of people for doing that. In fact one the local media told the public that their medical records were out there. I had elderly people storming my office wanting to know why we were releasing their medical records! We pulled their names up and they saw there was nothing there about medical records. After about a week word got out that people were going to our office and looking and they couldn't find anything wrong. I said, "We don't have your medical records out there. It is not a public record and the only medical record that we had out there was probably somebody who died and gone through probate, otherwise it wasn't out there."

GOODSILL: And the only medical part of that was cause-of-death?

WILSON: Right and a death record is not public unless you are a qualified applicant. In 2000 when we put several million records out there, it created a real savings for the county. I did not need thirty public computers anymore because a lot of people who were coming in to do research were able to stay home or at their office. So office space was reduced from about 2000 square feet to about 400. The public could stay home, two in the morning if they had nothing to do and they wanted to look things up they could. And we did not have to maintain everything on paper and in books or plats. We had a huge room, maybe 1000 square feet, of plat cabinet. Open it up there would be 100 plats in those cabinets and they weighed a ton. You would pull a slide out of a plat and look at it. Now it's all on-line, we don't need it anymore in paper. The public has access to it. We saved a \$100,000 the first year by putting all this on line. I didn't need as many employees because we didn't have all the customers coming in.

I was the second County in the state to start electronic recording of documents. In 2004 we set up an electronic recording system so mortgage companies and title companies and banks could electronically record the document right into our imaging system. So we never touched paper.

They kept the original and just electronically submitted it to us. Today 65% – 70% of all of our documents are electronically recorded. I have not increased my recording staff in twenty years, in fact I have decreased it. Yet the number of documents coming in has exploded to where we are recording over million documents a year. I am doing it with the same staff from twenty years ago because of electronic recording.

In 2003 I chaired and piloted the first electronic recording of court records. We are now in our eleventh year with that and it's called E-filing. Electronic filing of court records. As of January 1, 2014, the Texas Supreme Court mandated that in the top ten most populated counties all civil, probate and family documents had to be electronically recorded and electronically filed. Then in July of 2014 the next 250,000 in population and above will have to follow suit. And by July of 2016 all 254 counties will have to file all civil, probate and family records electronically. I serve on a standards committee and we are creating standards for all of this. By July 2016 all the court records will be electronically recorded too.

GOODSILL: A court record is anything that transpires in the Courtroom?

WILSON: Somewhat. Mainly a lawsuit or a filing. Somebody died and the heirs want to probate the will; a person needs a guardianship, or maybe a neighbor is putting a fence on your property and they won't move it so you file a civil suit; or a divorce. Sometimes they are dismissed and nothing is ever done because they resolved it out of court. So you have civil, probate and family. Family can be parent child relation, divorce, adoption. Those are now all electronically recorded, again we are not touching paper. We are moving to a paperless court. By about 2016 or 2017 you will see criminal courts and juvenile court matters moving in that direction to.

GOODSILL: When a lawyer comes in with documents they are scanned at that moment in time?

WILSON: Yes, they have to be filed prior to the hearing unless they are presenting a document to the court. The judge can hand the paper document to the clerk who will bring it down and image it; then shred the paper. We no longer keep paper, the only exception is with original wills. We must keep the original will, other than that we keep no paper. I keep no paper in my property records, and no paper for birth, death and marriage records. All of that has now been imaged.

As of last week (March 1), Commissioners Court records dating back to 1838 are imaged and on the web. Every document ever recorded in this office has now been imaged and is on the web site. Took me 32 years to get there but we got it done prior to me retiring this year.

GOODSILL: Ah! You're retiring this year?

WILSON: Yes I am, after 32 years. That's enough! (chuckling) Anyway, back in 1983 we only had one court and it was pretty simple to deal with one judge. Now we have five and every judge thinks that their court is different. I am trying to standardize. I send different staff to the courts and they can't remember this court wants that and that court wants this. Going paperless has really helped because now we don't have to try to remember which judge likes their paper this way and which judge likes their paper that way. It's now paperless and if they want paper they just hit the print button.

GOODSILL: I am thinking about the organization that needs to be done in order to get everything digitized and stored in the right files in the computer.

WILSON: You have to trust your software system and you have to trust your I.T. department because I never want an "OOPS" to happen. I don't want to hear, "Oh by the way we just had an 'oops' and all your records are gone." That's why we have all these back ups. We have the tape drives stored off site in Harris County. I electronically submit a back up to Indianapolis so at any given time there are three redundant systems. So that there is never an oops. If we had a major hurricane and had to shut down for a couple of days the web site is still available for the public. I am the first County Clerk in the U.S. to image everything and have it all on the web.

The mortgage companies and banks have said they absolutely love that and that is a critical component to their business. If you go into a bank today and you want to borrow money a minute before they hand you that check they are going to look at my website and see if there is any adverse action that was taken against you or the property that they are securing. They will check my web site just prior to doing a transaction with this person. There is so much fraud there; people de-fraud banks and mortgage companies and individuals. A person may have an IRS lien against them and their property. If the bank didn't have immediate access to those records they wouldn't know that and after the fact they would find out that the IRS had the priority lien against that person.

GOODSILL: Would an IRS lien be something that would come through your office?

WILSON: Yes, anything to do with property must be recorded in this office. IRS could be filing a lien against you personally not against your property. Well that is going to impact somebody if you are trying to get credit at a bank. So having that on the website gives them immediate access to data that could indicate a credit risk.

Realtors also check to make sure that you own the property. It is amazing the fraud out there. You see those little signs saying we will buy your ugly house? Say you are in trouble with the mortgage company and you can't make your mortgage and you know the mortgage company is going to foreclose on your property. Somebody comes along and says they want to buy your property and will make payments to you. They turn around and rent that property out, collecting money on that property. However, you are getting nothing because you are out of it. Nobody notified the mortgage company.

GOODSILL: And you are still responsible for the property!

WILSON: You are still responsible. They are collecting hundreds and thousands of dollars of rent on your house. Then the mortgage company forecloses against YOU because you still own that mortgage. And you say, "But I don't own that house anymore." "Yeah you do." It is a big scam. People will scam for any and every reason. We always try to tell people to look at the records to check on deeds. Did that deed get recorded? Did you record it? "Well no, we just signed a little agreement." "Did you notify your mortgage company that you sold this property?" "Well no—they said they were going to do that." We have had a lot of people in here very teary-eyed because they thought they were doing the right thing, a good thing. Then they realized they weren't.

GOODSILL: Go back to some of the legal things you have had to learn and some of the laws you thought were important to get passed.

WILSON: The very first law that I got passed was an effort to keep-it-simple-stupid. In the old days if it was a deed record you would have an Index to Deed. If it was a deed of trust, which is kind of a lien on the property, you had an index to Deed of Trust. If it was this type of record, you had all these indexes! I asked, "Why isn't everything just filed under one big umbrella, which is called Official Public Record. Why are there all these different categories? There were seven categories that you could file a record under. Another one was Miscellaneous for things that didn't fit in the other seven categories! Then you had to know which category it was filed in to find it."

GOODSILL: When the county was smaller and there was one person managing records, they probably thought that was a really great system.

WILSON: It was a state law that everything was alphabetized in seven different index records. Think of the white pages phone book. It didn't matter what street you lived on. You looked up Goodsill under G and then O to find an address and phone number in one book. I said, "Why don't we put everything under one category, and have one index?" I got a call from the Harris County Clerk saying, "I understand you want to do this. You can't that is not the law." "Well then I will get the law changed." HA, little did I know what was involved in getting a law changed!

GOODSILL: Was this early in your career?

WILSON: 1984, I had been in office a year. I got with my legislator, Tom DeLay, and another person. I said, "Here is what I want. Here is what I need to do." They thought it made sense. So we wrote it out and I met with the legislative board and they put it into the format that all bills had to be in. We got it passed! I said, "That was easy!?"

GOODSILL: Any objections from any of the other County Clerks?

WILSON: No, they loved it! It was called the Official Public Record Act.

GOODSILL: Did other counties have to re-organize all their past records?

WILSON: We made it a "may." The clerk MAY choose to go that way, or they could keep the seven categories.

GOODSILL: And passed it 1984?

WILSON: It must have been in '85. Legislatures meet in every-odd year, so it was '85. When the bill passed I immediately converted all records. Before they had eight stamps—a deed, a deed of trust, a lien, a this or that, or miscellaneous. They had to stamp on the document what book they were putting this in, or on what roll of microfilm.

GOODSILL: So it is no longer your staff's responsibility to know everything that is in every document. You record it and keep a record of it.

WILSON: We index every Official Public Record by names. The document has to have a title.

WILSON: When we were doing our computerization we were using the title that the person gave us. When I went to imaging in 1994 and we had a new software system, I realized that we needed to standardize our titles. We had hundred and hundreds, and the staff was going crazy remembering them. I said, "We are going to standardize it so a deed is a deed. It doesn't matter that they may also add 20 other words behind it. A deed of trust is a deed of trust. An affidavit is an affidavit. A notice is a notice. A lien is a lien." We narrowed it down to FORTY. We still use those today. Other counties have adopted our system because they realized you couldn't keep adding different document types and expect to keep any kind of cohesiveness in your records. My keep-it-simple-stupid system and looking at things from the public's viewpoint and the elected official's viewpoint worked. People are now looking at records on tablets and smartphones. You don't even need a desk top personal computer anymore.

GOODSILL: In your opinion, what is the most important leadership skills that a County Clerk has to have?

WILSON: The number ONE (because it is your biggest expense) is your staff. I have 70 employees. Managing my employees, trying to treat them all as equally as possible, establishing rules and regulations that are fair and equal. If you don't then someone is going to say why are you letting him or her wear this if I can't? As far as the elected position is concerned I think it is critical to look at how best to serve the public. Whether that public is from China or next door.

GOODSILL: Wait, why would the public be from China?

WILSON: China owns a lot of property in Fort Bend County. We have Chinese residents; the Aliana subdivision is owned by Chinese. We have property that is owned by the Prince of Lichtenstein in Europe. Foreigners own property, homes, and businesses in Fort Bend County. We have people from all walks of life that we deal with via emails or by letter or in person.

GOODSILL: What do you do about email documentation? Do you save all that?

WILSON: We have a generic email address that the public can email us asking questions or confirming.

GOODSILL: That is a whole layer of organization and decision-making regarding what needs to be saved and what doesn't.

WILSON: The next County Clerk, whoever that person is, has got to be a master in many different areas. Number one is never forgetting whom you serve. I think a lot of elected officials forget that. The public may come in and not like something but if we show them what the law says they understand it. If the law doesn't match reality, I have never been afraid to get the law changed. For instance, the law didn't match my keep-it-simple-stupid theory on having one index and all the records under one umbrella. I thought, why not! Why can't we? Everybody has used a phone book, now we don't even look at phone books.

GOODSILL: But we still index the same way—alphabetically.

WILSON: Exactly, we still go alphabetical because we all have names.

GOODSILL: Was it interesting to learn all those legal details?

WILSON: I read and I memorize. People are astounded that the Attorney General's office or the office of Court Administration or our own County Attorney's office says, "Call Dianne. She will know it." I don't want to say I have a photographic memory, but it is pretty close to that.

GOODSILL: I notice you are very good at dates.

WILSON: I can pull dates out. (laughs) That's the way my brain works. From early on I wanted to keep everything as simple as possible within the law. I don't know if you noticed when you walked in on my doors it says, "Courtesy is given and accepted here." I do not allow customers to abuse my staff. I NEVER allow my staff to forget whom they serve, which is the public. To be as courteous as possible and to keep their voice as even keel as possible even when we get people in here who can be pretty brutal. We've had to call the police to escort them out of here if they won't leave.

GOODSILL: I've been on both sides of that. I've been the customer who's come in and wanted something and run against a bureaucracy.

WILSON: My staff will say, "Here's what the law says." They will call me once in a while. I'll give you a couple of examples, one that just got in the newspaper. Same-sex marriage is not allowed yet in Texas. About 15 years ago, I had a very nice looking gentleman and a very nice looking woman come in to get a marriage license. "Dianne can you come out here? We need you." My staff always gives me the good ones! (laughs) So I go out and I see a nice looking man and a nice looking woman.

The problem is the woman's ID was still a man. I said, "Well until you go to court and get your sex changed by a court, I cannot issue you a marriage license." They were not very happy about that. But that is what the law says. We printed a copy out and gave it to them. I said, "Whether I agree with the law or not that is what Texas law says and we have to follow the law." In the paper just recently a judge in San Antonio said that that was unconstitutional, but they are going to wait for the US Supreme Court ruling on it. Personally, I think the Supreme Court is going to say it's unconstitutional and people of the same sex can marry. It won't be in my career because I'm retiring at the end of this year but it is going to happen. Sometimes the laws don't match the expectation of the public. Sometimes the laws go outside of the expectation, and then the public has to work to get that law changed. The laws are very behind in regards to technology.

GOODSILL: They are?

WILSON: They are very paper-oriented. It is going to take a long time for all the laws to catch up with technology, if ever!

GOODSILL: That is part of your job?

WILSON: Right. One law I got passed said that you had to keep everything in bound books. I didn't want to keep anything in bound books anymore I wanted to go with imaging. So I had to get the law changed.

GOODSILL: That must have ruffled a lot of feathers!

WILSON: No, a lot of the clerks in Texas agreed with my vision. They knew what was happening technologically, but they weren't ready to go there yet. I always made it a "may"; you may keep it in bound books or you may keep it electronically. Rarely did I get a law passed where it was "you shall." I always tried to make it a "may" because I didn't want ruffled feathers. But those clerks that came along and said, "Oooh I like that, let's do it." So when everything had to be kept in bound books we had all these fee books. Once the law said you could keep it electronically, you didn't have to keep books.

Fees, every time somebody came in to pay a court fine or fee, you had to write it in a book. You had all these books everywhere. It didn't make sense to me. Why not keep it in a computer where I can pull up your name and it shows everything?

Also going back to 1983, I was in charge of elections; that is County Clerk's duty. I was the administrator of all the elections in the County, whether it was a local or a state or a federal election. Remember I'm looking at all these different duties and trying to keep-it-simple-stupid. One of the big problems with elections was that I didn't control voter registration. The tax office did under the old poll tax system. They did away with poll tax but they still kept the voter registration duties under the tax office. Effective September 1, 1983, you could not take voter registration away from the tax assessor-collector unless the tax assessor-collector agreed to it. Prior to September 1, 1983, the Commissioner's Court could decide where to put it.

I went to Commissioners Court and got on the agenda. "I want voter registration because of all the problems that we are having to do with voter registration." I had husband and wife and children in different precincts living in the same house. That can't be. You can't do that. If they live in the same house, they have to be in the same precinct. The Commissioners ordered the tax assessor-collector to give me all the voter registration cards. They were 3x6 cards. What we didn't realize at the time is they kept them in the file cabinets. I showed up on Monday morning and there were piles of cards out of their file cabinets. They had just dumped the cards everywhere, and they kept the file drawers.

We ended up having to go through every one of them and put them in alpha order by name. We started seeing the wife was in precinct 6, and the husband was in precinct 8, and yet they had the same address. That is not possible. I went to our I.T. department and I said, "Create me a program so we can start inputting all the data and get rid of the cards." Going paperless. They created software that would throw out all the same addresses not in the same precinct. The list was huge. So we started driving the streets to locate addresses to determine its correct voting precinct. We laughed and called ourselves the street queens.

The only street maps at that time were from banks. So we went to all the banks in Richmond, Rosenberg, Sugar Land, Missouri City, Arcola, and Stafford and asked for a map of their area. There were no key maps. I knew Jim Rau the owner of Key Maps, so I went to him and said, "Jim, we need a key map of Fort Bend County." He said, "I can't afford that." I said, "What would it take to get you to do a key map of Fort Bend County?" He thought he was going to be real cute, he forgot I was a salesperson. He said, "You pre-sell 2,000 books and I'll print it." I said, "I can do that." In less than two months, I had 2,000 books sold.

I called him up and said, "I need to come see you." I walked in with all the orders and said, "Now print me a book." He kept his promise, he printed that map, and we got 2,000 of them sold. There is the very first Key map book of Fort Bend County sitting right up there on that shelf. The County bought a lot of them and so did the Cities.

GOODSILL: You can see they'd need them. Everybody in the city needed them—public works everybody.

WILSON: Now it is all computerized, Google map and all that. But back in 1983, '84, there was nothing.

GOODSILL: That was a win-win for everybody.

WILSON: Exactly, so when someone registered to vote, we plugged the key map number to your voter registration. Then if you have a son or a daughter registering later they went right into that. It made it so much simpler. Then I started realizing that somebody may be applying for a federal job or to go to a military academy, and they would want to know their voter history. We didn't have voter histories! Never even heard of voter history. So I created software that would maintain voter histories. All it said was that you voted in the Fort Bend Independent School District on this date. It didn't say how you voted but that you voted in the March Republican primary or that you voted in the April Democratic runoff. And all of the sudden everybody was saying, 'Oh I love this.'

GOODSILL: Why would the military academy care about that?

WILSON: The Congressperson wanted to know if this person voted.

GOODSILL: How active they were in political decisions?

WILSON: What party did they support and so on. Then come to find out, Tarrant County was getting ready to do the same thing. They beat me by two or three weeks. So I wasn't the first, but I was right there with them. Now it is normal to have voter histories, candidates use it. It is also used to catch vote fraud because if you voted in the March Republican primary, you cannot then vote Democratic in the runoff election. If you didn't have that voter history in a computerized system, you would have to go through all the records manually. Another reason to make these changes was to cut down on vote fraud. In 1990, I told the Commissioners that I was giving up elections because that year we ran 22 elections. I was doing the primaries too.

GOODSILL: Oh, you had to run them too.

WILSON: Oh yeah, and count the ballots and everything.

GOODSILL: So what department took that over?

WILSON: We created an Election Administrator office in '91. We now have an Election Administrator office. Ten percent of my job had taken up 90 percent of my time. It was time to give it up to an election administrator. Plus, I also saw coming down the road a very acrimonious attitude toward elections. I knew the federal government was starting to get more and more involved in elections, and I just wanted to back away.

Some County Clerks still do it; Harris County Clerk and Travis County Clerk still do it. They have managers who actually do it. I'm very hands on, I want to know what is going on. If I'm going to get the blame for something, I want to know that I did the best I could to make it right. I didn't have an election manager because I am very hands on. I have taught my staff that if there is anything out there that you think is negative, I want to know about it no matter how minor it is. Let me know about it before I get a phone call from the D.A. or the County Attorney or the public.

I'll give you an example; a gentleman went to my north annex. I have two annexes, one in Missouri City and one in Katy. It is a full service annex. The only thing you cannot do there is file new court cases, but everything else you can do. Why make customers come all the way to Richmond? I can have satellite offices and let the public go to those. My satellite offices only have two employees, sometimes only one if a person is out sick. So they close at lunch, which upsets some people. We close so that they can go get lunch. I had a gentleman very upset with that. He called, "When are you up for election I'll never vote for you again." "Sir, I'm retiring." "Well good because you are a horrible customer service person." My whole career has been based on customer service. "Well sir, I wish you had called us to find out what the office hours were. We have got it on our telephone answering system. We have it on our computer. We have it on all our doors. All you had to do was call or check on the computer." He didn't appreciate that comment. We try to have good relationship with our customers. They come up with some good ideas.

Our customers are from all over—mortgage companies, title companies, in state and out of state. Probably 15 years ago, before we started electronic recording, we had to tell title companies that they had to have all of their daily documents filed by 3:00 P.M. The title companies would bring in stacks of documents, so I said, "3:00 P.M. is your limit. You get it in by 3:00 or it gets recorded the next day." Now with electronic recording, we don't care. But back then we could not afford that kind of overtime.

I have probably the least overtime of any County office because we try to rely more and more on the electronic world and less on staff. The only time that I have increased my staff is when the law came along and required it or we added more county courts. There was a law that was passed about 5 or 6 years ago requiring us to be in compliance with all the state rules and regulations. I had to hire a compliance officer to make sure that we were sending in our reports timely and correctly.

GOODSILL: That is an on-going position not a temporary position?

WILSON: Yes, fulltime. If you were out of compliance, you lost your state funding and could lose some federal funding. We had to make sure we were in compliance at all times. It was a law that got passed—an unfunded mandate that we had to comply with. Every time we add a new county court we have to add four to six new employees.

I am also the Clerk of Commissioners Court. By law they cannot meet without me, or my representative, present. I try to attend most of the time if not I will send my administrative assistant. We maintain the records of the Commissioners. I am not their secretary. If they take action in court, then we keep the minutes and the agenda and documenting their actions. I have to countersign any documents that have to be signed as a proof that action was taken. That is a check and balance. For instance the court approved the purchase of the Gordon Ranch. The County Judge nor any Commissioner can act alone. Three of the five have to agree to something and I am the check and balance saying YES they officially took action on this matter, and I am attesting to that action

GOODSILL: Your presence is required in the courtroom?

WILSON: I have to send a representative if I am not there.

GOODSILL: Every court case?

WILSON: Yes

GOODSILL: Not just Commissioners Court, I mean every court cases.

WILSON: Yes. I have five county courts. If I cannot be there I send staff.

GOODSILL: That's why you had to have more staff every time you get a new court.

WILSON: Yes, they are there to assist the judge. While the judge is dealing with one case there may be an attorney on another case that is talking to the clerk. The clerk is going into the computer. They are working on an issue or providing information to the attorney. Perhaps a whole bunch of probationers are coming in and the judge is saying, "I am going to fine you \$300 and five days in jail." They will step over to the clerk who will enter the order while the judge is going to the next person.

In Commissioners Court, the law just got changed last year to permit a member of the court to attend electronically. Grady Prestage was the first to do it. There was a Commissioners Court hearing and he was in Washington D.C., and he needed his vote to be heard and so he called in on Skype. We got to see him on the screen.

Posting of public notices is something we haven't talked about. The public has the right to know about government meetings, so school districts, MUDs, LIDs, Cities, Counties and States have to post notice of their meetings and post their agendas. They have to post it through the County Clerk. They have to post it 72 hours in advance unless it is an emergency and there is a very small definition of an emergency. Then they can do a one or two hour emergency posting.

GOODSILL: Well I know the Historic Commission has to post its meetings.

WILSON: Yes, right, and you do it through my office. In the OLD DAYS there were THOUSANDS of pieces of paper up and down the hallway of the courthouse. When I first came into office, there were piles on tables. "What are all those papers outside my office?" "They are postings." First I had to learn what a posting was and why you have postings. "Why can't we have big corkboards with clips and you identify what the postings are and you put it under clips? We could leave the tables so people could pull a clip down, go through them and put them back up." So we did that for a lot of years.

Then I went and got the law changed. I spoke before a Senate Committee, "The Internet is here to stay. It is a new way of government, but we are still doing postings the old paper way." This was probably about 2000, 2001. I said, "Not every county has a webpage. Not every county is computer savvy. What I would like to see is that Counties of 50,000 and above that have a website can do electronic posting. Counties that don't have a website, don't have to." Going back to the "may." The Senate committee narrowed it even further. We had a website, so we started electronic posting. I remember a senator from way up in the northeast part of the state asked if I could call his County Clerks and see what they think about this. "Report back to me and let me know."

I called the four or five counties that he represented who had one computer in their office. The rest of them were all paper. They didn't have a website, so I reported that to him. He said, "Okay, well as long as it is a "may" and they don't have a problem with it I'll vote for it." So we got it passed. And now it is all electronic.

When I first came in to office in January 1983, Jodie Stavinoha was County Judge. I brought my secretary with me. In management you had a secretary. He came walking in and he looked at me and asked, "Why do you have a secretary?" I said, "For the same reason you do." He didn't know what to say. The County Clerk before me did her own typing. I was the first County Clerk in Fort Bend County to have a secretary.

When I bought computers he walks in and asks, "Why do you need a computer?" At that time they were called CRTs. They were basically dumb terminals. "Because I'm moving into the electronic era, and we need a computer." They used to keep all the money in boxes, like a shoebox, or like a little cash drawer. I found money everywhere! I said, "I want cash registers." The auditor came down and said, "You can't buy cash registers without my approval." I looked at her and said, "Where is that in the law?" "It is just policy!" And I said, "Well I'm buying cash registers." She was used to telling people what they could and couldn't do. "Do you mind if one of my employees goes with you to make sure that it is going to be compatible with reporting and stuff." "Sure they can go with me." I was going to a county that had the cash register that I wanted because it was tied to a computer. So I bought it and the person she sent with me said, "Oh, I like that, that's wonderful." So I was the first County Clerk to have a secretary, computers and electronic cash registers.

GOODSILL: (laughing) Wonderful and informative interview, Dianne. Thank you!

WILSON: You are welcome.

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First interview session ends..

Second interview session date: 04/11/2014  
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GOODSILL: After we finished the last interview you had some others things you wanted to talk about. So I am going to let you take the lead...

WILSON: Right after I came into office on January 1, 1983 I found out that there were a lot of records down in the basement of the courthouse. So I grabbed one of the supervisors and we trucked down to the basement of the courthouse. I was absolutely shocked; dirt floors mold and mildew everywhere, the BOOKS were covered in mold and mildew. There were rat droppings and roaches and shedding of animals. I don't even want to know what was down there. I said, "Oh my gosh, we have got to get these books out of here and get them up stairs and cleaned up and figure out what they are." While we were dragging books upstairs I found this sign saying Elected Lady Officials of Fort Bend County.



Nobody knew what it was. I happened to speak to a lady at the Fort Bend County Fair Grounds one day and I said I found this sign. I happened to have made a copy of it and I said, "Do you know what this is?" She goes, "Oh, that's a parade sign. I guess there were so few female elected officials they just put them all on one car and they didn't even get names on their car."

GOODSILL: No individual car per lady.

WILSON: No office, no individual car, no name, no title, nothing you just got stuck in a car. These are "lady elected officials". (laughter)

The sad thing was we were actually sending customers down to the basement of the Courthouse and it still had dirt floors in a lot of areas. Our current facility manager was shocked to find out that records had been stored down there. You can still crawl under the courthouse on the dirt floor. I don't how far you are going to get, I don't want to know, but I have shined a flashlight and you can see dirt floors.

GOODSILL: And if YOU can get there, you know the critters can get there. Were many of the records eaten?

WILSON: Over all, they were in pretty good shape. Some were in better shape than others. What really destroys a record are vermin and sunlight. There was no sunlight but the vermin were taking some of it. We were able to restore a lot of it, so it was okay. I never allowed the public to go down there again. Just the liability if anybody fell down those stairs. Anyway that was my introduction to the job.

In 1987 I was contacted by People-to-People International which is an organization out of Washington DC. President Nixon had gone to China along with Kissinger and he officially opened up the relationship between the U.S. and The Peoples Republic of China. The Chinese government had decided that certain groups of people could only have one child. That really plays a part in the recent Malaysian Airline catastrophe, I'll tell you why in a minute. They wanted a group of twenty-eight court administrators and elected officials to go over and talk to them about ownership of property, civil and probate. Originally their law said that everything passed to the oldest son. But with the one-child rule there may not be a son. So they had to change their laws and their culture, it was really more a culture than a law. Historically daughters got married and they left their family and went to live with their husband's family. Therefore her family lost her and any help she provided. That's why sons were very important; they supported the family. They brought in income, daughters didn't. A lot of Chinese sons went to Malaysia to work.

GOODSILL: Why did they go to Malaysia to work?

WILSON: For jobs, there are so many people in China they can't employ them. A lot of them come to the U.S. and they go to Malaysia and Singapore and Australia. They go to other countries to find work. They will go anywhere to find work. If that's the only child that family has and their son was on that plane they just lost not only their only child but they probably lost their means of income, because they don't have a Social Security System in China. It's interesting how that is now coming to back to haunt them.

GOODSILL: People listening to this to this may not know about the Malaysian airline crash, so tell us about it.

WILSON: Flight #370 left Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia a month ago and was supposed to be flying to Beijing. I think it is about a six-hour flight. For some reason it suddenly turned and went over the Indian Ocean. A month later they still cannot find the plane or any remains. They are hearing some pings and so they are hoping to find the black box. But a black box is only good for at most forty or fifty days and they are running out of time.

There were 239 people on that flight, a lot of them were Chinese Nationals. A lot of them were young men who were working in Malaysia and they were going home to visit their families. They would send money home. Maybe once a year or something they'd go home. A lot of these young people were twenty, thirty, and forty years old.

GOODSILL: And the elders were relying upon them.

WILSON: The elders were relying on them to send money home. They lost their only child.

GOODSILL: Not only that but no firm record that they are dead. The legal proof.

WILSON: Right, they may receive some insurance money from the Malaysian government, or there could be some type of restitution to these people, but who knows.

GOODSILL: So back in 1988 when you were in China. What was it like?

WILSON: We were invited in 1987 and we went in March and April of 1988. We traveled from Beijing to Fujau, to Xian and to points in between Guangzhou, Hong Kong. We were there in the last years that the British owned Hong Kong. We met with the Chief of the Supreme Court, who was British, and they were telling us about the preparation for turning Hong Kong back to China.

The following year was Tiananmen Square, with the young man standing in front of the tank; we are all familiar with that photo now. I was right there when China was taking over Hong Kong. We met so many young people who were learning English, who wanted to come to America. They knew there was a better life. Even though they loved China, there are so many people that they knew to have a better life they needed to go somewhere else.



GOODSILL: Like a pyramid; slight odds of rising with so many people to compete against?

WILSON: Their universities are tough to get into, finding a job is tough. A lot of them don't want to stand behind a cow plowing the rice field. Young kids would come up to me, with English books of some sort, maybe a poem or a story. They were trying to learn English and they asked me to read to them so they could hear how we spoke. I would laugh and say, "I am from the southern part of the United States so my accent is going to be different than California and New York." They thought that was interesting too. They have different accents in China too.

I had a chance to talk to a lot of students; we went to Universities, we went to elementary schools, we went to high schools to see how these children were being taught. It was more than just a court visit. We actually had a cultural exchange. We told them how we lived and we got to see how they lived. We were there a month. I loved it.

GOODSILL: Do you think that you were actually helpful in providing some basis for civil law?

WILSON: I think so, civil including probate. We took a lot of laws and practices with us so that we could hand samples to them. Not just Texas law but from all over the United States. Twenty-eight of us were selected to go.

GOODSILL: Did you meet with high level officials to convey your knowledge?

WILSON: Yes! We met with judges too.

GOODSILL: They were receptive?

WILSON: Yes, they wanted to understand because they knew they were going to have to start changing. Their concern was more facing cultural changes. We stopped at a place to have a picnic lunch and I noticed there was big sign near a river. Something told me that there was something unusual about that sign. I went over to Jow Lee, who was our guide and our interpreter. I said, "Jow Lee can you tell me what the sign says?" "You don't want to know what the sign says." "Yes I would." And he said, "No you don't." I looked at him and said, "It has something to do with drowning baby girls, doesn't it? He said, "I would rather not talk about it." I looked at him. "We are not recording anything, just shake your head yes or no. Does that sign have to do with not drowning baby girls here?" He just nodded his head yes.

Families could only have one child and they didn't want a daughter because a daughter goes away and lives with the husband and takes care of HIS family. Where a son would provide income and help them.

GOODSILL: And provides heirs.

WILSON: Yes, but the problem that they are facing now is that China has too many males and not enough females. The Chinese men have to go to other countries to find wives.

GOODSILL: That mixes the whole gene pool, doesn't it?

WILSON: Japan has more females than males so they are having to send their females to find husbands. We laughed -- China goes to Japan to find wives, Japan goes to China to find husbands and they all go to Australia to work! Anyway it was a wonderful trip.

GOODSILL: Do you have any idea how successful they have been in making these changes that you went over to advise them on?

WILSON: No, I never followed up. They wanted another group to come in about five years and I was not in that group. I assume they did implement changes because they have had to. If a family had no son to pass land, property, money or anything of value and they only had a daughter they would have to change that inheritance-by-males-only policy.

GOODSILL: I know that a problem in third world countries is upward mobility. Especially in countries where there are no property records, no reliable legal systems. If you cannot PROVE you own land how can you sell it? Or leave it to your heirs?

WILSON: I had a chance to go to Brazil some years back. The Brazilians "knew" without understanding property and property lines who owned what. But there was no way for the government to tax property holdings, there was no way to institute environmental controls, or establish land use guidelines. They had hired some companies to come in and try to figure out where the land markers were. Some people said, "Oh yeah I own all this land from here to that mountain." On large land holdings it may have been easier to document ownership but those who lived in or near a city had no landmarks to indicate boundaries. The company that was hired to determine boundaries was having a difficult time.

GOODSILL: Maybe good maybe bad.

WILSON: Right, and a lot of them lived on top each other. "I own this little box." One of the things they found was that dogs knew. A dog would run from one end of their property line to the other and stop. The next dog would do the same. They finally realized the dogs knew the property boundaries. So all the company representative had to do was note the path of each dog to determine the boundaries of that property. Smart dogs.

At the hotel I happened to meet one of these guys that was surveying. When he found out who I was he said, "Oh my gosh, land records, recording...!" He was the interpreter for his team. We all had dinner and drinks that night and they were telling me all about nuances and the problems they were having because there is no recording system. I was explaining how Stephen F. Austin was an Empresario for the Spanish and Mexican government and how they allowed him to sell land in Texas to protect the silver mines in Mexico. Everybody...

GOODSILL: Wait a minute, why would selling land in Texas protect the silver mines?

WILSON: Texas belonged first to Spain and then to Mexico. Above Texas was the United States. France owned Louisiana down to Florida. No American citizen could own land in Texas because they didn't want America to come in and take over their silver mines located in northern Mexico. They were very protective. They allowed Stephen F. Austin and others to be Empresarios. Stephen F. Austin surveyed his properties and kept detailed books and provided the landowner with the details of their land and their metes and bounds. He was the first Empresario to really keep good records. It is wonderful to go to the General Land Office in Austin and actually see his books. They assigned the County Clerk to be the recorder of deeds because people couldn't carry around all their documents. Documents would burn in fires; they'd be lost in floods and everything else. They needed a place for records to be permanently stored. I was explaining the Texas system to the Brazilians. That was when they told me about the dogs knowing their boundaries. We all laughed!



GOODSILL: Not long ago The Historical Commission went down to the San Jacinto Monument Museum. They had a most interesting exhibition of the chains that they used to for old time surveying. They had them all hung out on the walls. I was so interested in looking at those surveying tools. Those little links of chains were works of art. Stephen F. Austin was a surveyor himself.

WILSON: Yes, right. I can't wait for them to complete the update at the Stephen F. Austin Historical State Park in San Felipe, Texas. Austin was an amazing man. The fact that he basically died in poverty is sad. He gave his all to Texas and the U.S.

GOODSILL: He had a lot of organizational skills, that's for sure.

WILSON: Yes, very detailed. Anyway, from China having to figure out inheritance laws and ownership to some of these countries where the government owns everything, all of a sudden they are trying to figure out a better system. A lot of countries are realizing the importance of private ownership and recording of that ownership. Some countries jumped centuries ahead in that they went right to imaging and electronic storage of this information. Where we went from books, to microfilm, to imaging they went directly to imaging.

GOODSILL: But they had to do all their surveying at this late date instead of relying on anything historic.

WILSON: Right.

GOODSILL: Can you imagine the disputes, Dianne? Aren't you glad you didn't have to moderate any of that?

WILSON: (laughter) The next topic on my list is the cosmonaut wedding. In 2003 I was in Houston attending a Mental Health Mental Retardation Conference when I received a phone call from an attorney representing an American female and a Russian citizen, wanting to know if I would issue a marriage license to someone not on earth.

GOODSILL: (laughter)

WILSON: I said, "EXCUSE ME!" He said, "My client is Ekaterina Dmitriev (goes by Kat). Her fiancé, Russian Cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko, is the International Space Station Commander currently in orbit. They want to get married while he is still in space. The Harris County Clerk refused. Will you help?" "Absolutely." What an honor, what an historical event. It was the first marriage license ever issued for a person not on Earth

(laughter). We set a date and NASA set up a phone call for me to talk to Yuri in space. We had his notarized document saying that he agreed to this, but I wanted to talk to him to confirm. NASA said, "You may ask him one question and he will say yes or no and then we are cutting the connection."

GOODSILL: NASA was very protective their of time. Did you have to go to NASA for this phone call?

WILSON: No, but I went to NASA for the wedding. They also were very mindful that Yuri did not get permission from the Russian government and he was a military officer. He was not asking their permission. I found out about that later because I got some really threatening phone calls.

GOODSILL: From... Russia?

WILSON: Yes, from officials in Russia (laughter)

GOODSILL: Saying you authorized a wedding of an officer and you didn't have legal recourse to do that?

WILSON: Right. Anyway the day that she came to get the marriage license the PRESS showed up. This placed was packed with media. It was crazy, I mean you can't imagine.

GOODSILL: You were in this building, the Travis Building?



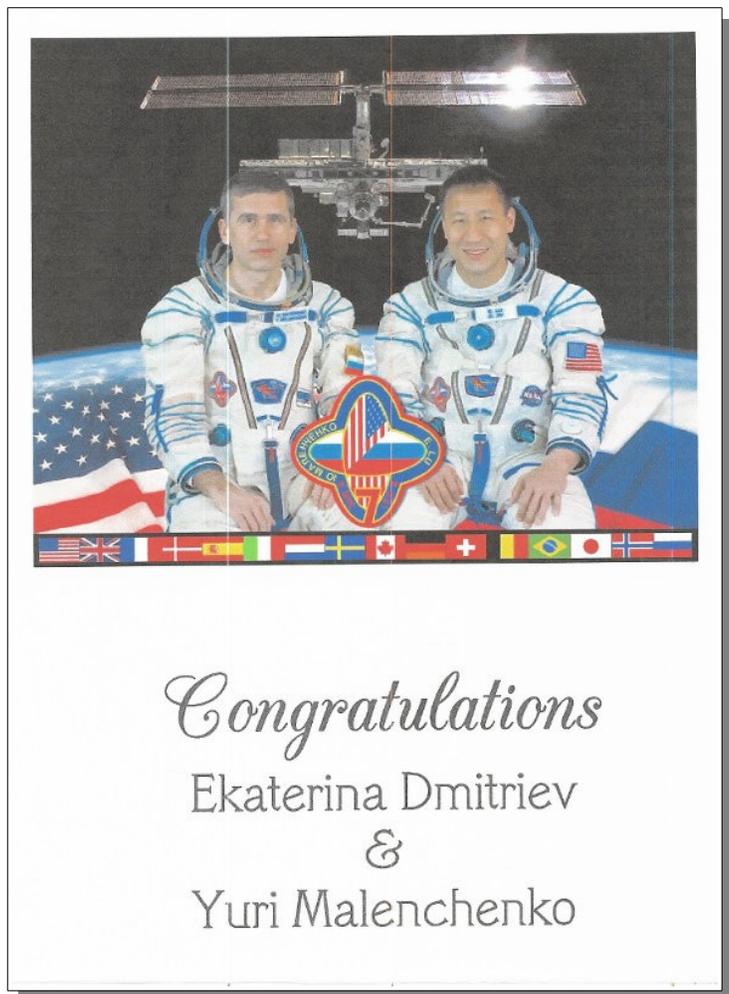
[see <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/License-issued-for-first-space-wedding-2131317.php>]

WILSON: Yes, well actually this little one story building that is attached to the Travis Building. I researched, Russia's flag is red, white and blue and the U.S. flag is red, white and blue and the Texas flag is red, white and blue. So my staff and I wore red, white and blue. We had Texas flags and U.S. flags and a few Russian flags and I had a dozen yellow roses to present to the bride. The yellow roses symbolized Texas and I wanted to welcome her to Fort Bend County. We were honored to do this.

It was amazing with all the press; click, click, click cameras. I issued the marriage license and she raised her hand to swear. I did talk to Yuri for a moment. They got that on camera, I was on the phone probably fifteen or twenty seconds ... it seemed like an hour. It was amazing. Then we got a formal invitation to come to NASA for the wedding. My first assistant wrote about that event. They had a huge IMAX screen, probably even bigger than an IMAX screen.

GOODSILL: He is in space she is on earth?

WILSON: Yes, he was still in space. Ed Lou, who is an American astronaut, had a keyboard up there, and he locked his feet in... because you know it's weightless. He locked his feet in and his body is slightly floating and he is playing the wedding march.



He is playing the wedding march and she comes down the aisle and Yuri is apparently looking through the camera and intently watching her coming down the aisle. We had a proxy stand-in in case we lost connection.

GOODSILL: What does that mean?

WILSON: A proxy is where the person is not available to attend their wedding, male or female. They can authorize someone else to stand in their stead so that the wedding can continue. Could be all of a sudden the person couldn't come back from a war zone or they are in a hospital and they can't come to their wedding and you couldn't for what ever reason take the wedding to them. You have a proxy stand in your stead. So we had one there just in case we lost connection. The person performed the wedding and the bride said I DO. There was a delay of maybe five or ten seconds and then you saw him saying I DO. It was amazing to witness that on this huge screen.



Anyway we all went to a restaurant in Clear Lake to celebrate. She had a life size... stand up... cut out cardboard of Yuri. She could stand next to him and have her picture taken. (both GOODSILL and WILSON break into hearty laughter)

GOODSILL: What was she doing in Houston?

WILSON: She is from Russian parents; she is an American born, Russian. She has dual citizenship and her mother worked for NASA and her father was a university professor. She met Yuri while he was here for training.

GOODSILL: Do you know if the marriage has lasted?

WILSON: Yes, oh yes. I keep in touch with them. We communicate. They have a little girl she must be about six or seven now her name is Kamilla. We were invited in December to go to a restaurant in Clear Lake to celebrate his birthday.

GOODSILL: Do they still live in Houston?

WILSON: No they are in Moscow. He still has to come here for training because he is still an active cosmonaut. He had just gotten back from the International Space Station. We got to meet one of the American astronauts who was up there with him; Sonny (Sunita Williams). We met the Japanese astronaut Akihito Hoshide. Anyway he had them at his party as well as many friends. It was really great to see Kat again. That was the first time I had met Yuri.

GOODSILL: Ahh, in person rather than a cardboard cut out!

WILSON: In person, exactly. Ten years later I get a chance to meet him and it was really great.

GOODSILL: That's a great story.

WILSON: Okay, my next topic is Female Pay Parity. It was in the paper today. It's amazing that women still make less than men in the same position. On a national level they are talking about it in Congress and in corporate America, they are talking about it the State Houses.

GOODSILL: They are talking about it in the White House.

WILSON: They are talking about it at the White House and in the media. In 1995 there were four female elected officials in Fort Bend County. The County Clerk, the District Clerk, the County Treasurer and the Tax Assessor Collector. It could have been 1994 when the Commissioners Court gave the male elected officials and department heads pay raises and not the females. My thought was, "Excuse me! No we are not tolerating this. If you don't give us equal pay then we will sue." They didn't and we sued.

The four of us got together and hired an attorney and we filed a federal lawsuit for pay parity. The Commissioner's Court at that time felt very strongly that they were in the right. We felt very strongly that we were in the right. They decided to appoint a citizens committee of their choosing. We had no say in the matter. The citizens committee's duty was to interview each commissioner and county judge and each of the four elected female officials. The citizens committee was to come back and give a report as to whether they felt that we should be given a pay parity increase. We felt strongly regardless of how the citizens committee came back. But we were blasted in the news media.

GOODSILL: You were portrayed as greedy, self-seeking?

WILSON: Yes. We were elected officials, we knew what our pay was when we took office and we ought to be satisfied with that. We felt it can't be any worse than it is now. The media was saying that the citizens committee could come back and agree with the Commissioners. Much to our surprise though, the citizens committee came back and recommended that the Commissioners Court LOWER their salary and that they RAISE ours above their salary.

They rationalized that we have larger staffs than the Commissioners. I have seventy employees and I don't think any of the Commissioners have more than four. They come in to work basically once a week and we are here everyday. It was interesting to hear the report. So the Commissioners decided they better settle out of court. The agreement was that we receive 97% of what they made. They still didn't want pay parity. I am the last female elected official still in office under that agreement. When I retire at the end of this year it will be interesting to see what they do. Because there is still a female District Clerk, the County Clerk will still be female the Tax Assessor is female and we have two female judges.

GOODSILL: Do female judges have pay parity?

WILSON: Yes with the male counterparts, by law.

GOODSILL: We don't know if the person coming into County Clerk will be male or female.

WILSON: It will be a female because there are only two candidates. A democrat and a republican. Both are female. So there will be three female elected officials and their salaries are still determined by Commissioners Court. Anyway I received 97% of the Commissioner's pay.

GOODSILL: But their salary did not go down? (laughter)

WILSON: No! (laughter) It's interesting to read about this issue in the paper today. The conversation is the same as it was twenty years ago!

WILSON: Okay various state and national awards. I think the award I am most proud of is that column that looks like a roman column there. It is the Sam Seale Trail Blazer Award. Of the approximately 4,500 county elected officials in this state the Texas Association of Counties may, if deserved, select one person annually as the Trailblazer.

A quote from the Director of Texas Association of Counties, Karen Norris, states that a Trailblazer is an elected official who gives of their time not just to their county but to the state. I was very honored to have been named the Trail Blazer for 2003. I am Trailblazer No. 3.

GOODSILL: Have there been other women?

WILSON: Yes there have been a few other women but not another County Clerk. I am still the only one.

GOODSILL: Was it based on the way you handled the records?

WILSON: I served on a lot of state committees. I've had a major impact on legislation; right now I am on the State's Standards Committee for Electronic Filing of Court records. Making paperless courts, helping to set the standards for the whole state of Texas. Due to my willingness to delve in and be more than just the County Clerk in Fort Bend County, the Texas Association of Counties recognized my effort over these thirty-two years. I am proud of that



I've won many "Best Practice" awards from the Texas Association of Counties. [See list of awards attached to this interview.] The Best Practice Award from the Texas Association of Counties is given to counties who have created a practice that other counties can emulate. I received the 2001 and the 2005 and the 2009 County Best Practice Innovation Awards. The State of Texas Bureau of Vital Statistics gives "Five Star" awards for local registrars who meet certain criteria in maintaining birth, death and marriage records. Since 1998 we have won the Five Star Award every year. We received it for 2013, which was given in December of this past year.

GOODSILL: Congratulations

WILSON: Thank you

WILSON: In 1997 I was named "County Clerk Of The Year" for the County and District Clerk Association of Texas. That is given to one County Clerk every year. In 2006 I was the "Public Elected Official Of The Year" for the Houston Branch of the National Association of Social Workers for leadership and service for those with disabilities.

GOODSILL: I noticed you also said you were in a meeting of MHMRA.

WILSON: I am Chairman of the Board of Trustees for Texana Center.

GOODSILL: How did you get involved with mental health?

WILSON: My husband's sister is mentally retarded and we are her guardians. When we lived in North Carolina I volunteered at one of the day centers for those with mental retardation. Now it's called I. D. D. Intellectual Development Disabilities. When we lived in Germany I helped raised money to start an orphanage for those with disabilities who had been abandoned. I have been involved since 1970. I served as chairman of the volunteer services counsel at Richmond State Supported Living Center. From that, Texana Center was created in 1999. I have been on the board since then, and Chairman of the Board of Trustees since 2005.

GOODSILL: That's all activity outside of your work?

WILSON: Yes! Then I have been appointed by the Texas Supreme Court Chief Justices to various committees. Setting standards for Pro Se litigants (self represented litigants), setting standards for electronic filing of court records, setting standards for maintaining records electronically. I have served on quite a few committees and I still do. In 1978 -1989 the Secretary of State, Jack Rains, appointed me to serve on the State of Texas Election Commission which had oversight and approval of election equipment and voting regulations.

Then Governor George Bush in 1988 appointed me to the Texas Land Records Commission to study and rewrite statutes involving land records, recording formats, rules, regulations and retention. In 2012 Representative John Zerwas appointed me to the state's, Rider 72 which is looking at rewriting all the laws having to do with birth and death records and who can obtain copies. We are going to totally revamp how it's done.

GOODSILL: There was a whole committee working on that?

WILSON: Yes, under Governor Perry.

GOODSILL: Did you feel you had good success with that? They took your advice on the things you recommended?

WILSON: Yes! We are working on it. It is going to take a little bit of time, because the state has to develop the software to implement a lot of this. Supposedly by 2016 it will be totally implemented in the State of Texas.

WILSON: On behalf of the Fort Bend County Clerks and District Clerks Association I have chaired and written about forty statutes. The Chief Justice, Tom Phillips, appointed me to chair the E-File committee to create electronic filing. You serve on a committee and somebody likes what you do so they put you on another committee and before you know it you are on ten fifteen different committees. It's been great, I have enjoyed every bit of it. Another of the awards that I am proud of is the International Association of Clerks, Recorders, Election Officials and Treasures' award; The Directors "Excellence in Local Government Award" in 1986.

GOODSILL: International?

WILSON: International Association of Clerks, Recorders, Election Officials and Treasurers', I am the first Texas recipient of that award. I think there have only been one or two other Texans who have received it. I was the first female Rotarian president in Fort Bend County. When I became a Rotarian it was the first year that Rotary allowed women to be members. I was the first female President. About three years later I became president of Oyster Creek Rotary Club. There are five or six Rotary Clubs in Fort Bend County. I was Rotarian Of The Year for my club in 1993. That was a nice award I appreciated that. There are quite a few awards that I have been given for my efforts and I serve on quite a few committees such as Texana, and The Fort Bend Boys Choir, I have been president of that organization. My son is a charter member of The Fort Bend Boys Choir, 1982. He was eleven years old.

GOODSILL: What is your son's name?

WILSON: Christopher. Chris Wilson. He now lives in Australia. He is married to an Australian, Kimberlee, and they have two children, Jade and Jack. Jade is six and Jack is five. He still has fond memories of the Fort Bend Boys Choir and it is still going strong today. Last year I gave up the presidency, I said it's time to move on.

I do mediation, on the side as a volunteer. I don't get paid for it. I do it because most of the hearings are Justice of the Peace cases and County Court At Law cases. I am already an elected official so I am being paid whether I am in this office or not. I feel I am giving back my time as a volunteer mediator.

It is CRITICAL that the person who holds this office understands the significance of legal records and how critical they are to the operation of government. If you can't find your deed record, how do you prove you own that land? How does government tax you on that land? How does Central Appraisal District value that land? How does a city or county regulate what you do with that land? There is a big article in the Houston Chronicle about how the City of Houston is getting ready to pass an ordinance having to do with hoarders who live in units that are attached to other units, not single-family housing, but apartments and condos. Hoarders because of their mental disabilities are causing grief for their neighbors by odor, rats, vermin of every kind, fire problems, health issues. Apparently the City of Houston is going to be the first city in Texas to create an ordinance against hoarders. Well we all know someone who kept every newspaper, every magazine and you could barely walk into her house. It's a mental illness.

GOODSILL: Yes, hard to regulate.

WILSON: They are going to be able to have the Fire Marshall or the Health Department show up with a warrant or something. I don't want to say a warrant because it's not really a warrant, but they can enter a person's home based on a complaint by a neighbor or the manager. To be able to go in and get this person help, clean out the place and make sure it doesn't happen again.

GOODSILL: Lots of luck with that.

WILSON: Right, so it is kind of interesting how all of this evolves again into ownership and knowing who lives where. You have to have properly recorded documents and indexes.

GOODSILL: Is that related to this hoarding thing? How does indexing relate to that?

WILSON: Well, because if the person owns that condo, but they may be renting it out to somebody, they go back to the owner. I remember my son when he was in fifth grade, he came home from school and he said, "Mom I have to prove who I am without any paper documents. How do I prove that?" I thought, "I have no idea how you prove who you are without any paper documents."

Think about all these people with war in their countries fleeing with the clothes on their backs. How do they prove who they are? How do they prove what country they belong to? Or what they own, how do they prove what year they were born? Records are critical. Look at Ancestry.com they have made a fortune having all these records for people to know where they came from and who their family members are. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the records they keep in underground in vaults from all over the world is phenomenal. It's probably the largest collection of genealogy.

GOODSILL: Have you been out there?

WILSON: Yes I have.

GOODSILL: I bet that was fascinating to you.

WILSON: Absolutely, absolutely. My concern with the person who comes into this office after me is that if they are not grounded in absolute above-reproach honesty you could do so much harm. If you had somebody holding this office that was dishonest or they didn't keep a strong hand on what was happening, you could file a birth certificate that's fake and bring somebody into this country. You could file a death certificate on somebody... kill somebody. Illegally file the death certificate as if it was normal. You could come in and wipe out your ownership of property and put somebody else's name on it and that would force you to have to go to a court of law to prove that you did not sell that property to somebody, that they took that. How do you prove that if all the records have changed?

GOODSILL: Or it could happen through just neglect... not paying attention to the details.

WILSON: That's right. Hands on, training of staff.

GOODSILL: Hypothetically speaking, how would a voter know the qualities that would make a good County Clerk?

WILSON: It really comes down to the integrity of that person. When I teach courses to the clerks I stress that you don't have to know everything that goes on in your office, but it is so critical that your staff is highly trained and that they have rules and regulations in place that they wouldn't dare go outside of. I had an employee that we caught selling birth certificates. She was pocketing money for doing it. The district attorney refused to prosecute; we determined that she pocketed over six hundred dollars.

Fortunately we caught it fairly quickly when one of my other employees noticed that the same person would come in and wait for this person to be available. When we started going back and looking at birth certificates that she issued we realized what was happening. The other employee was honest enough to say, "Something is not right here." We would have eventually caught it but it could have been several more weeks or several more months before we did an audit.

It's really important that the person who is caretaker of this office, is mindful of how critical these records are; how important they are to the citizens, to the economy of this county, this state, this nation. They need to hold close to the guidelines and the laws and know them and understand them in order to always make sure that these records are protected. Now that all these records have gone to the Cloud you don't have paper, it's all electronic. So it is really critical that the County Clerk maintains the most accurate, up to date state of the art computer system software.

Redundancy. I have every record pinged electronically, sent electronically to Indianapolis. Every minute of every day. We could have a tornado wipe every building along here and all my records that are electronic (because I have no paper) are protected because they are in Indianapolis. That is as safe as I could get. Prior to the Indianapolis back up system when hurricane Ike was coming, Ike or Rita, we had to pull the disks, wrap them in plastic go over to the Office of Emergency Management which was the old jail back over here and put it in an inside jail cell that still had the bars on it and lock it. We knew that was the only place that wouldn't go down, even if a Tornado hit it, it was safe.

GOODSILL: And protected from flood?

WILSON: Protected from everything because it was inside and on the second floor.

GOODSILL: Let me ask a question about Indiana? Is Indiana less susceptible to hurricanes and earthquakes than other locations?

WILSON: Right.

GOODSILL: It is a specifically chosen because it is geologically safe.

WILSON: Right, geologically safe number one. Originally, I kept it on Southwest Freeway across from Lakewood Church, at a safe site. When the Southwest Freeway flooded I decided we needed to be outside of Texas. After much research we chose Indianapolis.

GOODSILL: Is there ever any danger of hacking or tampering with the records?

WILSON: I would venture to say that we are ninety-nine point nine percent safe because a hacker can only go so far. They never actually touch the record. They touch a replication of the record. It would be like you putting up a false front. Somebody can get to the front but they can't get to the back – where the actual records are stored.

GOODSILL: Or alter it.

WILSON: Altering it is impossible; all they see is a replication. It's like when you go on the web you're not actually going into somebody's records, you are going into their storefront. It's like walking into a store, you don't see the offices in the back and the safe and what they manufacture you just see a fancy storefront. To say ninety-nine point nine I feel very comfortable, I feel I've safeguarded the records as much as they can be safeguarded. Somebody said why don't you just go back to all the paper and the books. Well, paper and books can burn, paper and books can flood, and paper and books can be tossed to the wind. Paper and books can walk away. Electronically you can't touch anything. I feel more secure with the electronic record than I do paper. That's my story and I am sticking to it.

GOODSILL: Thank you very much, Dianne.

WILSON: Oh, thank you Jane. I appreciate your willingness to take your time to do these interviews.

GOODSILL: My pleasure, especially when they are as interesting as yours.

Interview ends

**Dianne Wilson  
County Clerk  
Fort Bend County, Texas**

**PROFESSIONAL:**

**Elected County Clerk, Fort Bend County 1983 – Present**

- Constitutional policy making duties as an elected official include plan, develop and implement operational, personnel and office policies and procedures, business hours, filing standards not set forth in state statutes and other areas required to direct and administer the business of the Office of County Clerk
- Constitutional duties as County Clerk include acting as the County Recorder, Clerk of Court for County Court and County Courts-at-Law, and Clerk of Court for Commissioners Court
- Employ a staff of 65, a \$5 million operating budget with offices in four locations throughout the county
- Fiduciary responsibility for investing, managing and disbursing registry funds totaling over \$8 million annually; and collecting fees and fines in excess of \$6 million annually

**County Clerk and Local Vital Registrar, 1990 – Present**

- In 1991, at my behest, Fort Bend County and all incorporated municipalities in the county adopted a Resolution naming me the sole official responsible for the recording, archiving, and issuing of all birth and death records and marriage licenses
- Established the county's online access to State-recorded birth certificates
- Computer indexed and imaged all the county's birth, death and marriage records dating from 1838 to present

**County Clerk and County Elections Administrator: 1983-90**

- As the county's Election Officer, Fort Bend County Commissioners Court appointed me in 1983, at my request, as the Voter Registrar in addition to election duties
- Established the county's central computerized ballot counting system
- Designed a voter's voting history system (first in the State of Texas)
- Created the county's voter precinct directory of streets, blocks and related voting precincts
- Instrumental in Key Map, Inc. of Houston creating a Key Map of Fort Bend County

**Texas Credentialed Mediator 2011 – Present**

- 150 hours of mediating of 120 cases to date
- Approved as Mediator for the Texas Dept of Insurance (wind storm damage claims)

**PAST**

- International Association of Clerks, Recorders, Election Officials and Treasurers, 1984-2000
- National Association of County Recorders, Election Officials and Clerks, 1986-2000
- National Association of Court Managers 1986-2000
- Oyster Creek Rotary Club, President 1994-95, Member 1988-1999
  - ▷ First Female President in District 5890
  - ▷ Paul Harris Fellow
  - ▷ Ten Year Perfect Attendance
- Literacy Volunteers of Fort Bend County, Charter Board Member, 1988-1995;
  - ▷ Co-Founder of the successful annual Evening of Wine and Music Gala
- Richmond State Center, Volunteer Services Council, Chair 1986-88, Member 1982-92;
  - ▷ Raised over \$1 million dollars in 1987 to build the Hypo Therapy Therapeutic Riding Arena
- Central Gulf MHMR, Board of Directors 1992-1999
- Fort Bend County Alliance for Drug Prevention Executive Board, 1988-93
- Volunteer: Boy Scouts of America Council & YMCA youth programs, 1976-1986 (son is an Eagle Scout)
- Fort Bend Foster Parents Association, Co-Founder & Charter President 1976, Member 1976-1979

**SPEAKER, FACILITATOR and AUTHOR:**

- Speaker and facilitator at Clerks' educational conferences: the V.G. Young Institute of County Government at Texas A&M University, and the University of Texas School of Law for Clerks
- Speaker for various government classes at Fort Bend ISD, Lamar CISD, Texas A&M University at Galveston and Wharton County Junior College
- Speaker at the annual Association of Title Information Management national conferences
- Speaker and facilitator at annual Bureau of Vital Statistics conference in Austin
- Served as substitute Economics Instructor at University of Saint Thomas, Houston 1991
- Authored over 40 articles in various professional governmental journals
- Authored at over 45 successful legislative bills for the Clerks' Association

**PERSONAL:**

Married to Robert Wilson since 1969

Son, Christopher, resides in Australia with his wife and two children (Jade & Jack)

Extensive domestic and international travel, and lived in Europe for several years

**EDUCATION:**

Extensive post graduate studies in Public Administration including published dissertation on "Significance of Colonization and Evolution of Land Recordkeeping Under the Six Flags of Texas"

Graduate Fellow, National Center for State Courts' Institute for Court Management under the authority of the United States Supreme Court, Washington, D.C.

Bachelor of Liberal Studies, St. Edward's University, Texas

**APPOINTMENTS:**

Appointed by State of Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice:

1. Judicial Committee for Information Technology 1997 to present  
▷ Chaired the e-Filing committee
2. Texas Access to Justice Commission 1999 to present
3. State of Texas' Pro Se Assistance Committee 1999 to present
4. Represented the State of Texas at the National Pro Se Litigation Conference 1999
5. Public Access to Court Records Committee 2003 - 2004
6. Texas Justice State Strategic Plan for Information Resource Management Advisory Committee 1999-2005

Appointed in 1987-1989 by Secretary of State Jack Rains to serve on the State of Texas Election Commission with oversight and approval of election equipment and voting regulations.

Appointed by Governor George W. Bush in 1988 to the Texas Land Records Commission to study and rewrite statutes involving land records, recording format, rules and regulations on record retention and other such matters. HB 1285 passed in 1989.

Appointed by Rep. John Zerwas to serve on the State's 2012 RIDER 72 Committee responsible for creating recommendations to the 2013 Legislature on issues affecting birth and death records in Texas

Serve as legislative liaison and expert witness on behalf of Fort Bend County, the County and District Clerks Association and the Urban Recorders Association, as well as analyze legislative issues for the State of Texas Legislative Budget Board

**PROFESSIONAL & PUBLIC SERVICE ASSOCIATIONS:**

**CURRENT**

- Texana (MHMR) Center, Chair 2005 – Present; Charter Board of Trustees 1999-present
- Fort Bend Boys Choir of Texas, President 2012- 2013, Charter Member since 1982
- Fort Bend County Bail Bond Board, Chair 1987-1998 & 2012-2013; Vice Chair 2010 – 2011; Member 1984-present
- County & District Clerks Association of Texas, 1983 – Present, Legislative Committee 1986-Present, Legislative Chair 1992-1994
- Urban Recorders Alliance, Co-Founder and Board of Directors 2011-Present
- Council of Urban Counties, TechShare Committee 1999 - Present
- Texas Association of Mediators, Member 2011 – Present
- Texas Mediator Credentialing Association, Member 2011 - Present
- Property Records Industry Association, Member 2000 – Present
- Association of Title Information Management, Member 1992 - Present
- The ARC of Fort Bend County, 1986-present

## **PAST**

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- National Association of County Recorders, Election Officials and Clerks, 1986-2000
- National Association of Court Managers 1986-2000
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## **SPEAKER, FACILITATOR and AUTHOR:**

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- Speaker for various government classes at Fort Bend ISD, Lamar CISD, Texas A&M University at Galveston and Wharton County Junior College
- Speaker at the annual Association of Title Information Management national conferences
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## **PERSONAL:**

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## **EDUCATION:**

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Bachelor of Liberal Studies, St. Edward's University, Texas