

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Edward William Kuban Sr.**

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Interviewer: Jane Goodsill and Bradley Stavinoha

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

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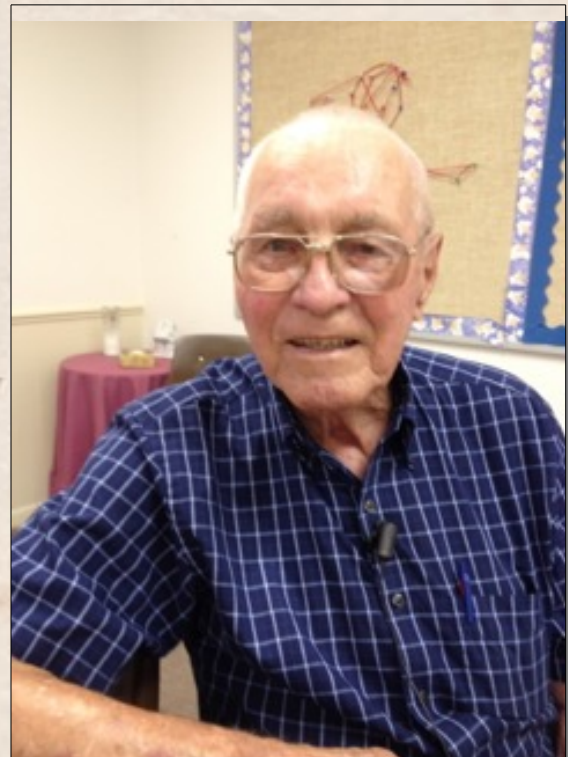
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Edward William Kuban Sr.

Transcript

GOODSILL: I understand you are of Czech heritage.

KUBAN: My mother was a Fojtik and she came from Czechoslovakia. My daddy's daddy also came from Czechoslovakia.

GOODSILL: Would you be willing to give us your name and your mother's and father's names?

KUBAN: My dad's name was Robert Paul Kuban and my mama's name was Pauline Fojtik. They had 16 kids, Grandpa Fojtik did.

GOODSILL: Wow.

KUBAN: Twelve are living till not too long ago. Six boys and six girls. But that soldier boy standing right there in the catholic cemetery is my uncle. His name was Joseph Jr. He got killed in World War I.

GOODSILL: So tell us how these Czechoslovakian people got to Fort Bend County.

KUBAN: My grandpa, Joseph Fojtik, came here from Czechoslovakia in the late 1800's. He bought land where I live now, or pretty close, for \$7 an acre. He sold it for \$21 dollars an acre (chuckling). My mother was born there in 1905.

GOODSILL: Why did Joseph come here?

KUBAN: I guess to get away from Czechoslovakia. My grandpa on my daddy's side, Pavel Kuban, was from Czechoslovakia, and he escaped. They wouldn't let you go nowhere. He made it, I don't know how. My daddy was born in 1905. His daddy died when he was nine years old. My daddy had two brothers. My grandma was from Hallettsville. She was a Janak.

GOODSILL: I am still curious how they got from Czechoslovakia to Needville, Texas.

KUBAN: I guess by boat.

GOODSILL: (heartly laughter) It just seems like a remote place to end up from Europe. So what happen when they got here?

KUBAN: I don't know...he met my grandma. She's from Hallettsville. Hallettsville is nothing but Janaks. They should have called it Janakville.

GOODSILL: Janakville (laughing) So, when your families got to Needville what business where they in?

KUBAN: They got married and were farmers. My grandpa had a molasses mill. He was making molasses. We raised sugar cane and we had to strip the leaves off the stalks and cut it in bundles and haul it to the press. He pressed the juice out of it and cooked syrup out of it.

GOODSILL: Messy business, wasn't it?

KUBAN: Had a mule going round and round pressing the juice out of them stalks.

GOODSILL: What was your job?

KUBAN: Watching the mule so he would move.

GOODSILL: How did you do it?

KUBAN: With a stick.

GOODSILL: (laughing)

KUBAN: And he cooked that syrup in a great big ole cast iron pot.

GOODSILL: Right. Then when it was cooked, what happened to it?

KUBAN: We put it in barrels and preserved it. My mama in the wintertime when it's cold, she'd give me a pitcher and tell me to go get a pitcher of molasses out of that barrel. We had it in a smokehouse on a shelf. When it was really cold it took you forever to get a cup full of that dad-gum syrup out of that spout.

GOODSILL: Because it wouldn't pour? It was too cold to pour?

KUBAN: Too cold (chuckling). Black strap molasses they called it.

GOODSILL: So this is how you make molasses. You press the cane juice then you boil it up and make the molasses.

KUBAN: You cooked this in the furnace with wood.

GOODSILL: There is no refining in this process at all?

KUBAN: Uh-uh, strictly from the stalk into the juice.

GOODSILL: Do you remember your grandfather?

KUBAN: Oh yeah, I was ten years old. He use to pull my ears when I wouldn't listen.

GOODSILL: What language would he speak to you in?

KUBAN: Czech

GOODSILL: And if he were telling you that you were a good boy, how would he say it?

KUBAN: *Tvuj jeden blaho tu* – that means be good. *Pojd' sem* – that means come here, *jak sie masz* – how are you? I couldn't speak English when I started school. But I was lucky. I had a Bohemian schoolteacher, Petrosky.

STAVINOHA: In the Marlow community?

KUBAN: It ain't there, just grown up in bushes now. We used to walk to school about a mile on a dirt road. No gravel. Pull your boots off and hide them under the bridge and go to school barefooted and cold; then you got home and you were sick and you got a whipping.

GOODSILL: Why did you take your boots off?

KUBAN: Because you get that ole black mud on them you could hardly walk (chuckling).

GOODSILL: (laughter) So you told us what your grandfather did with the molasses. What kind of work did your father do?

KUBAN: My dad, he was a bookkeeper for the old Horak Gin and he was a maintainer operator. He would make ditches for farmers and he was an officer in an insurance agency until he died.

GOODSILL: What's the name of the company?

KUBAN: (Phonetically spelled) *RVOS*

GOODSILL: What does that mean?

KUBAN: That was a paper. We still get that paper. Phonetically spelling the words — *Vickrany* is outstanding, and *OH* is member owned, and *Estelespolik* is lodge.

GOODSILL: That's really beautiful when it comes off your tongue.

KUBAN: He entered the lodge around 1925. Here's a stamp that my daddy used. He had to stamp everybody's policy before it would go through. He used to be a claims adjuster and sell insurance. It's a cast-iron stamper.

GOODSILL: That must have been an important business in a farming community. Tell us what an insurance agent does?

KUBAN: If a member had fire or storm damage he had to go and estimate the cost of the damage.

GOODSILL: Fire, an act of nature, might cause damage and the farmer would have to be reimbursed?

STAVINOHA: Do you remember any major fires that your dad had to go out and do? Or hurricanes?

KUBAN: Daddy was a secretary in the lodge, but we had people that would go out like claims adjusters and look at the damage.

STAVINOHA: Any loss of life that you remember in any of these fires or anything?

KUBAN: Fire, oh, yeah, we had fires, storms, and hail. Bradley, you got the job that I used to have selling (home insurance through) RVOS. He's a 'jack of all trades.

STAVINOHA: This company has covered the Needville community for 105 years.

KUBAN: Dad was farming what you call high gear [grain is *hegari* and often called 'high gear']. Kenneth Otto used to talk about maize. We used to plant high gear and it's similar to maize but it's a bigger head. In 1940 we made a pretty good crop and Dad decided he would cut the heads off the stalk and throw it in a wagon and haul it to the barn. We shoveled it into the barn and Dad put a whole load in one pile next to the unload window and it caught fire. The heat of the green milo (milo is the correct name for what we used to call maize; maize is really corn and this stuff is grain sorghum) caught the barn on fire in 1940. If you don't dry it, it starts a fire. Daddy had a garage next to the barn where he kept his old Model A car. I guess he wanted to get it out of there to keep the barn catching it afire. I guess he got excited and he flooded it with gas or something and it wouldn't start. So we had to pull it out of there by hand, me, Mama, and my brother and my sister. We pushed it towards the house. The barn burned down and Mama wanted to build a new house and make a barn out of the house.

Dad decided he wanted a seed house upstairs and he built a new barn and it's still on the home place. I think it's 1940 so it's 75 years old. They built it out of 1x12" box boards. The home place is on Pleasant Road, other side of Needville.

GOODSILL: When were you born?

KUBAN: November 19, 1930, in Needville.

GOODSILL: What happened in your life?

KUBAN: I got married to a Bohemian girl named Dorothy 61 years ago. She still bosses me!

GOODSILL: You probably need it.

KUBAN: Yeah, I do.

GOODSILL: What's her maiden name?

KUBAN: Blinka. Our children are Eddie Jr. and Shirley, a son and a daughter and I've got five grandchildren.

GOODSILL: Ah. Excellent. That's a good thing isn't it?

KUBAN: Five grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

GOODSILL: Even better. Tell us what a typical day was like in your childhood.

KUBAN: Hunted squirrels and fished. That's all I could do. I finally got a bicycle at the Woolworth and I thought I was in high cotton.

GOODSILL: How old do you think you were when you got your bicycle?

KUBAN: Must have been around ten or eleven.

GOODSILL: The roads were still muddy and...?

KUBAN: Oh yeah, we didn't get no electricity until 1946. After the war.

GOODSILL: Really? You didn't get electricity until after the war?

KUBAN: 1946, they didn't build no cars then either. 1941 was the last car they made... you know during the war. Then they didn't start making them until 1945 and '46.

GOODSILL: Let's go back to having no electricity when you were growing up. What was the lighting source in your house?

KUBAN: Coal oil lamps, you know those old lamps with that chimney on them and that wick inside that coal oil. We had three or four of them. Mama had a wood stove; everything was wood. Cook stove was wood, the heater was wood. We had to split wood for winter. Later on she told Daddy to get her a coal oil stove. Two burner, cast steel with an oven on top. She thought she was in Houston

GOODSILL: (laughing) Wood burning and coal burning. Is it the same stove?

KUBAN: No, it's a different stove. Kerosene was a liquid and wood was wood. You would cook with wood. You put it under them burners in a stove and put a skillet on top of it. You would cook with a wood stove or kerosene. Kerosene had a round burner with a wick in it. You would light that wick and it would burn. It had an adjustment on it for higher or lower. Mama would cook homemade bread and, well, she cooked everything.

STAVINOHA: Didn't you cook with a lot of corn cobs, too?

KUBAN: Yeah. We used to cook with corn cobs as a heat source, too. Used them for toilet paper, too.

STAVINOHA: Really, y'all did? The wrappings?

KUBAN: No, just the straight corn cob. You probably don't remember that.

GOODSILL: (laughing) This is good information. You had no toilets in the house, you had an outhouse?

KUBAN: No, we had an outside outhouse.

GOODSILL: Outside, always. Even after the war?

KUBAN: No, Daddy finally got electricity. They got a water well pump where we pumped water and they put in an inside restroom. We farmed with mules and we had to pitch pump that water. You farmed with mules all day long and it was so hot that you couldn't pump enough water for them. There would be three or four or five of them drinking at one time. You hear them sucking air trying to get more water. When Daddy wasn't looking we would run them away from the trough so we could get some water in.

STAVINOHA: What year did you all get electricity? You said 1946?

KUBAN: I was sixteen years old.

STAVINOHA: That's when you all got indoor plumbing, too, about that same time?

KUBAN: Yeah, after the war and we had two light companies. Houston Light on one side and R.E.A. on the other. Remember R.E.A.? Two light companies so they were fighting each other and I believe for a dollar and a quarter a month we had electricity. You could burn 24 kilowatts; we never used it up.

GOODSILL: Wow, so you had lights. Did you get an electric stove at that time?

KUBAN: No, not right away.

GOODSILL: Water source before you had your pump. What was your water source?

KUBAN: Pitch pump, that's the only thing we had.

GOODSILL: Oh the pitch pump is what you had, so that was a lot of work to get water out. So you were doing a lot of things besides chasing squirrels. You were chopping wood, doing water...

KUBAN: Oh. yeah. farm work. You had to get everything ready for winter. Ride a mule when we was planting. I used to ride a mule, milk nine or ten cows. Make butter; Mama had a cream separator where she would put the milk and the cream separator would sit on three legs and had a glass eyesight on it and you could see how thick the cream was in there. You would drain a spigot off at the bottom. You'd get the buttermilk off and then when the cream started coming you'd catch it with another. Mama would whip it up and make head cheese out of it. [Editor's note: head cheese has no dairy in it so he may be referring to sour cream; the French call it fresh cheese or *fromage blanc*.

GOODSILL: Oh, boy. I bet it was good.

KUBAN: Yea, hang it on the clothes line.

STAVINOHA: To get the whey out.

KUBAN: Yea, then sprinkle sugar on it and eat it. Boy that was good.

GOODSILL: Oh, I bet.

KUBAN: (laughing) You had to watch out how much sugar you used, too. You had to buy sugar! (laughing)

GOODSILL: Sugar was in short supply, wasn't it? Were you still using molasses at that time?

KUBAN: Yeah, we had molasses.

GOODSILL: But once you got a taste of refined sugar did you want molasses or sugar?

KUBAN: No, that sugar was better than that molasses. You get burned out on molasses.

GOODSILL: Yeah, it is thick, isn't it?

KUBAN: Yeah, and it had a bitter taste.

GOODSILL: So, how many years of school did you go to?

KUBAN: Quit in the tenth grade. We had that country school at Marlo. We were taught through the ninth grade and then I started Needville school and the principal made me mad so I quit. Daddy was glad because he had more help on the farm.

GOODSILL: You came right back to help on the farm. So dad was running the insurance business and running the farm?

KUBAN: Yeah, he farmed for a living. Then he drove a maintainer, kept books at the gin and the office. He made a dollar anywhere he could.

GOODSILL: How many acres did your dad have on his farm?

KUBAN: 78, it wasn't real big.

STAVINOHA: Then you drove a truck to San Antonio every day for Lone Star Beer?

KUBAN: Yeah, I did that for 23 years. Ever week to the Lone Star Brewery in San Antonio. And I'd bring back bottled beer, keg beer, cans, glass. I started in 1965; I was married already. Had two children.

GOODSILL: Do you remember what the depression was like in this part of the country? Did it affect you very much?

KUBAN: A dollar was hard to get. You went to town like once a month. You got by with whatever you could.

GOODSILL: You basically had to live on what you could grow? What kind of vegetable garden did you have?

KUBAN: We had a big garden. We used to have tomatoes and squash and cabbage and corn and all that.

STAVINOHA: Could you say all those vegetables in Czech?

KUBAN: *Zelly* was sauerkraut, cabbage and potatoes was *potacky* and eggs was *vejce*.

GOODSILL: Were you responsible for taking care of the vegetable garden?

KUBAN: Yeah, I had to chop and pull grass and whatever. There wasn't no chemicals.

GOODSILL: You had a lot of things to do besides chasing squirrels!

KUBAN: I'd be glad when we would get rain so we could go hunting.

GOODSILL: Tell me what the war years were like in Needville.

KUBAN: Everything was rationed. They quit making automobiles and then you got these gas stamps. We had an old Model A and we had to use A B C stamps. You could use just as many gallons of gas as you burned.

GOODSILL: Were different people allowed different rations? A farmer as opposed to a shop keeper?

KUBAN: Daddy had a truck so you get a T stamp, and you could get more gas. Then he had some neighbors that he would give his stamps to if he didn't use them up.

STAVINOHA: How did you all farm back then? How did you get fertilizer?

KUBAN: We didn't get fertilizer. The only fertilizer you got was out of the chicken house or the cow pen. There was no commercial fertilizer. You go to town and buy what you could and then trade eggs for groceries.

GOODSILL: So you were too young to be in World War II. Did you have family members that were in the war?

KUBAN: Kinfolk, yeah.

STAVINOHA: How did you pick cotton then? Did you have migrant labor or just you and the family?

KUBAN: They come in from west Texas by truck loads. They'd pick your cotton for you. You had to shelter them, like put them in a barn, somewhere.

STAVINOHA: They lived in your barn?

KUBAN: Yeah, anywhere they could, Most of them slept under a tree in the summer time because it was too hot.

GOODSILL: So they would just come down for the picking season?

KUBAN: Just through the season and go back home.

GOODSILL: Were they Mexican?

KUBAN: Yeah, they were. There were whites too. They had a bobtail truck. They would go from one farm to the other. When they got caught up on this farm they would go to the other one.

GOODSILL: How about storms, do you remember any storms coming through the area?

KUBAN: Oh, in 1932, I was in a smokehouse with a third floor; I wasn't but three years old.

GOODSILL: (laughing) So you remember it well. What did your family tell you about it?

KUBAN: It was pretty mean. The 1900 storm was the worst. 1900 wiped out Galveston. In 1960 we had another storm. 1951 we had a big freeze. I just had an old 1941 Chevrolet. I was rough necking in the oilfield and I always parked my car in the pasture because we didn't have no gravel roads. I got in the car next morning to go to work and I couldn't move the car – it was frozen to the ground (all laughing). I had to go in the house and get some hot water and pour it on them tires and spin out of that rut and then go. It was all muddy roads.

STAVINOHA: Where did you roughneck? West Columbia?

KUBAN: Different places all over. Vanderbilt, El Campo, Nada, Hempstead, West Columbia, Damon and Fairchilds, anywhere we had drilled wells. I was a derrick man working in the derricks.

GOODSILL: Tell us about what was involved.

KUBAN: When they come out of the hole you had to unhook the elevators and take that joint of pipe and stand it up in the rack we had made. Going in the hole you had to catch the elevator and lock the joints up. The joints were 90 something foot long.

GOODSILL: Was it dangerous work?

KUBAN: Well, we was 96 feet up in the sky unclamping joints. You had a seat belt. In case you fall out it would grab you. You had to catch on pretty quick.

GOODSILL: How long did you do that?

KUBAN: I guess for 2-3 years. Then I worked at Gulf States Tubing in Rosenberg for 8 years. I worked shift work there while I went into business for myself. We bought a beer joint and a grocery store and a gas station in Pleak called Kuban's Grocery. My sister owns the place now and changed the name to the Village Stop. Both of my children were born at the beer joint, in the living quarters out back. The boy was born in 1955 and the daughter in 1956.

GOODSILL: Can you compare the life you have lived to the life your children have lived?

KUBAN: Yeah, but they don't believe what you tell them.

GOODSILL: They don't believe that you had to walk with no shoes in the mud?

KUBAN: No, they say, "Oh, Powpo!" They don't know.

GOODSILL: (laughing) Okay we are going to show them this interview.

STAVINOHA: How about that girl that was shot by the UT gunman? Do you remember the man who shot everybody at UT and shot the girl from Needville?

KUBAN: Oh, he was up in that tower at Austin.

STAVINOHA: Yeah, tell us about that guy.

KUBAN: I just knew him; I didn't have that much to do with him. He crawled up in that tower and was shooting anybody he saw.

GOODSILL: He was from Needville.

KUBAN: Yeah, he was from Needville.

GOODSILL: That was not a good claim to fame for Needville. That was a bad thing. What would you say are the major changes you've seen in Needville in your life?

KUBAN: Getting old.

GOODSILL: No, the major change in the town, not in you. (Laughing) This guy's a real comedian.

KUBAN: Things are different now than they were then.

GOODSILL: Would you say it's better now? Or not?

KUBAN: I wouldn't want to live them old golden years but...

STAVINOHA: I don't know how you made it without an air conditioner.

KUBAN: Slept under the china berry tree on a cot; didn't have no fans.

STAVINOHA: You slept outside in the summers to stay cool?

KUBAN: You put wet rags on you to cool yourself. There wasn't no electricity so you couldn't run a fan or nothing.

GOODSILL: Do you miss the days of farming cotton, milo and soybeans?

KUBAN: Oh yes, I still miss farming.

GOODSILL: What do you miss about it?

KUBAN: I liked to do it. I still get on a tractor and do a little work here and there. If I don't fall off.

STAVINOHA: (laughing) Mr. Kuban, tell her the story about the man with the mules who used to bring him home every day after the beer joint. They were copilots, they would automatically take him home. He would get drunk and even that mule would drive him home on that trailer.

KUBAN: I run a store at Pleak and he always come there in a Model A and he'd buy a six pack of beer and his wife didn't want him drinking so he would hide it behind the seat and then he would get drunk and couldn't drive home. So I would take him home and when his wife would see me driving him home, here she come out of the house. I left.

STAVINOHA: Who's the guy with the wagon?

KUBAN: Sewettman.

STAVINOHA: Sewettman, that's the one I want to hear about.

KUBAN: He would go to the gin in Needville with mules and a wagon. He lived on the other side of Four Corners where we were raised at. He would get drunk and he would be singing like hell, driving home with those mules. He'd be singing in German and everything, drunk and those mules knew where to go. One time they missed the bridge with the wagon because they wasn't driving.

GOODSILL: (laughing)

KUBAN: H. Y. Sewettman we called him.

GOODSILL: You were in the Korean War?

KUBAN: I don't want to go back. I was there in 1951, '52 and '53. Right in the boom.

GOODSILL: Cold?

KUBAN: Cold! 32 degrees below zero. Splash the water out of your helmet and it would freeze.

GOODSILL: You thought you had it bad back in Needville when you had no electricity, until you got to Korea!

KUBAN: Yes, slept in a tent on a dirt floor.

GOODSILL: Did you see a lot of battle?

KUBAN: I was in and out from the front lines. I would haul soldiers there and haul them back. All the officers.

GOODSILL: Haul them in what?

KUBAN: In a deuce and a half truck. Thirty and forty men at a time.

GOODSILL: You were a driver?

KUBAN: Yes. My buddy was a driver too, from Three Rivers, Texas and he got killed in Korea. His name was Campo. A sniper shot him. They set up in them rocks and a sniper would kill you. My jeep got shot twice but it never hit me.

GOODSILL: It must have be scary.

KUBAN: Oh, yeah.

GOODSILL: Because you'd never know when it was going to come.

KUBAN: I had a little officer, he was a full bird colonel, from El Paso, Texas and he found out I was from Texas. Every time he had to go make a delivery to the front lines he would want Kuban to drive him. Sometimes I would try to play sick so I wouldn't have to go, but he wanted me to go. (Laughing)

GOODSILL: He was getting the guy he feels comfortable with but putting you in danger?

KUBAN: Then a bullet hit the dad-gum hood on the jeep and another one come through the windshield and he slid up on that seat and said, "Let's get out of here, Kuban!" So I give it the gas. He was a little bitty guy, a full bird colonel. He didn't weigh a 150 pounds.

GOODSILL: I bet you were glad when you got out of there.

KUBAN: Oh, yeah.

GOODSILL: Your tour of duty was three years and then they brought you home?

KUBAN: Two years, but I got out on a point system. You get so many points for being on the front the lines and you can get out earlier. I got out about a month early.

GOODSILL: When you came home, what did you do?

KUBAN: Got married.

GOODSILL: That was a good thing.

KUBAN: Wife was waiting on me when I got home.

GOODSILL: Was she waiting? Yeah, and then you started having children right away.

KUBAN: We got married in 1953 and the boy was born in '55. I don't know nobody here, not hardly now but when I was little I knew everybody. In the old days Mama used to make butter at home, hang cheese on the clothesline and we would sprinkle sugar on it and eat it.

STAVINOHA: No *kolaches*, just sugar on cheese?

KUBAN: Oh, yeah, she would make *kolaches*.

STAVINOHA: *Kovasek*?

KUBAN: *Kovasnike*, yeah, that's sausage *kolaches*. I make them yet. I make our own sausage.

GOODSILL: Are you teaching any of your great-grandchildren Czech?

KUBAN: Well, they raise hell with you; that you should have been teaching them. But we can talk about them and they don't understand!

GOODSILL: (Laughing) Thanks so much for your time and sharing your memories with us!

Interview ends.