

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Hattie Mae Branch Bailey**

Interview Date: 04/07/2014

Interviewer: Jane Goodsill, Joe D. Robinson

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Project / Group: Henderson-Wessendorff Foundation

33 Pages



This oral history is copyrighted 2014, by the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. All Rights Reserved. For information contact: Fort Bend County Historical Commission, Attn: Chairman-Oral History Committee, 301 Jackson St., Richmond, TX, 77469.

Terms and Conditions

This file may not be modified or changed in any way without contacting the Fort Bend County Historical Commission.

This file may not be redistributed for profit.

Please do not 'hot link' to this file.

Please do not repost this file.



Transcript

GOODSILL: Today I am speaking with Hattie Mae Bailey, who sometimes goes by the name of Dit. Thank you for coming in to be interviewed. We're doing interview as part of the Henderson-Wessendorff history project. I wonder if you would like to start your story with how you came to know the Wessendorffs?

BAILEY: I lived down there--my parents had a farm next to their farm.

GOODSILL: Where was that?

BAILEY: Down in the country, down there where Miz Wessendorff's house is today. My parents had probably had the adjoining property. Mr. Wessendorff had to go down to my mama's father's property.

ROBINSON: Was it like behind Headquarters, more? Down at that end of the property?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm.

GOODSILL: And what was the name of your mother and father?

BAILEY: Her name was Helen Branch. My dad was named Ed Branch. But her maiden name was Helen Gibson.

GOODSILL: So, they had their property. How did your father come to get his property?

BAILEY: Because he married my mother. (laughs)

GOODSILL: (with amusement in her voice) How did she have her property?

BAILEY: From her father.

GOODSILL: She inherited the property from her father.

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. Mark Gibson.

GOODSILL: And do you know the story of how he got his property.

BAILEY: He was an independent old man, he was. Miz Janie told me that he had people on his property, working for him, picking cotton and chopping cotton. And they could go to the store and get anything they wanted. He stood for it and paid for it. I guess that's the proper way. Just like Mr. Joe Wessendorff did. You knowed Mr. Joe, Joe D!

ROBINSON: Exactly, "My name's good and you can go down there and charge in my name."

BAILEY: And Miz Janie used to tell me he was an independent old man. That was my grandfather, my mother's father.

GOODSILL: What did that mean, an independent old man?

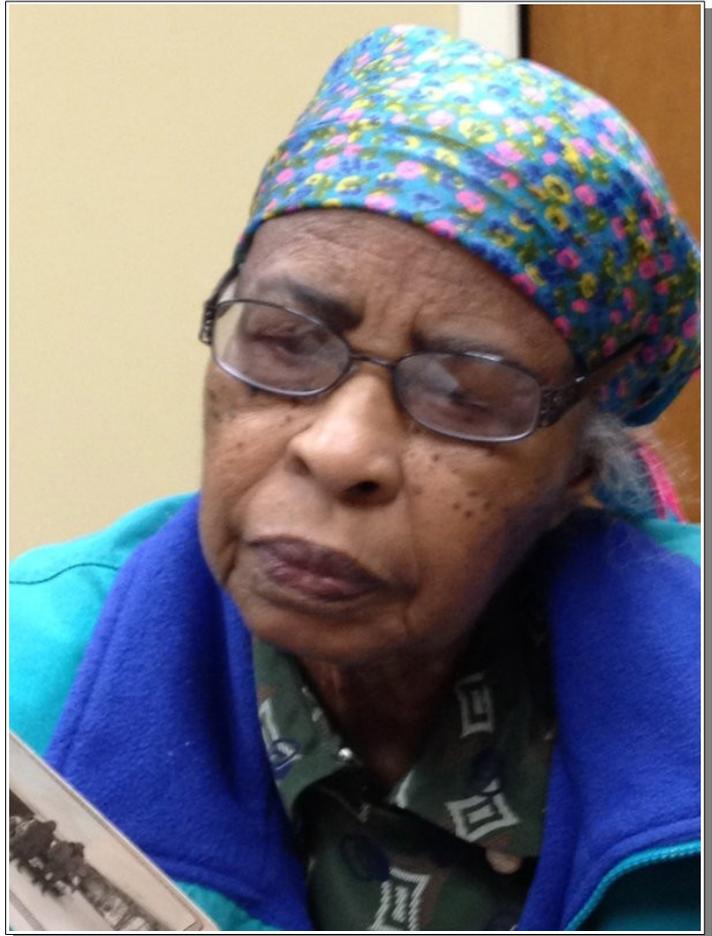
BAILEY: Because he had all those people working for him on his place, so that's what Miz Janie told me. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Did you know all about that (aside to Joe D. Robinson)?

ROBINSON: I don't know any of that.

BAILEY: Joe D. wasn't in existence! (all laugh)

GOODSILL: What year was this? Do you know when your grandfather, Mark Gibson, was born?



BAILEY: No, ma'am. I didn't even get a chance to see him. He died before I was born. Before my mother married. When he died, he left all that property to my mother and they had some more children in the family, more sisters and more brothers.

GOODSILL: But he left it all to her?

BAILEY: To the whole family.

GOODSILL: And part of it came to your mother.

BAILEY: Mmm hmm.

GOODSILL: And when your mother married your father, your father helped managed that area?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: They kept it as a farm?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm.

GOODSILL: So they knew the Wessendorffs because they were neighbors, right next door to them.

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am. But at that particular time, Mr. Wessendorff and them didn't OWN that property. Blakely Winston owned that property at that time. Years later, Mr. Wessendorff bought that property, where he is now. Where the house is now.

GOODSILL: Do you know anything about Blakely Winston?

BAILEY: No, ma'am. Just know the name. They lived there on that property first, and then Mr. Joe A. bought that property from the Winstons.

GOODSILL: So, what year were you born in, Hattie?

BAILEY: 1927.

GOODSILL: And did you have brothers and sisters?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: Want to tell me who the oldest was and go down the line?

BAILEY: (laughs) Willie Branch, Alfred Branch, James Branch.

GOODSILL: Who came after James?

BAILEY: Then my sister, Dorothy Branch and then me. J.C. was the youngest.

GOODSILL: Did you grow up on your parent's property?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am. That's where I was raised, right down in the country.

GOODSILL: Tell me what your days were like, when you were growing up? When you were a little girl?

BAILEY: Well, my daddy farmed. (laughing) We chopped cotton and picked cotton.

ROBINSON: And got eggs, too, I would bet, from the chickens. You had a long day, every day!

BAILEY: Right!

GOODSILL: So you helped with the farming. Everybody helped?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am. All the children pitched in at cotton picking time. We had to pick cotton, chop cotton (laughs).

GOODSILL: How was it, picking cotton?

BAILEY: Well, we had to have a sack we put on, like a shawl, and go out in the field and pick it, on those long rows. You've seen cotton on a row.

GOODSILL: But describe it, give us a feeling for it.

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am. You have a big cotton sack and put it on your shoulder. Then you get a row of cotton and go on down the field.

GOODSILL: I notice you have very long, beautiful fingers. Was it helpful to have long fingers when you were trying to reach in there to get the cotton?

BAILEY: (laughs) Yes, ma'am!

GOODSILL: And cotton always gets harvested when it is HOT. Right? In the summer?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: That must have been really awful.

BAILEY: It was! Sometimes it would be real hot. Sometimes it would be so hot we had to wait until it cooled off a little bit and then we'd go pick cotton.

GOODSILL: But everybody had to do it, all the kids? Your mom, too? Or did she do housework?

BAILEY: All the children picked cotton. Them that wasn't big enough to pick cotton. Then we had to chop cotton.

GOODSILL: Tell me about chopping cotton.

BAILEY: Cotton-chopping time. You'd take the hoe and go around the plant on the row, and chop all the grass and stuff.

GOODSILL: Oh, like weeding!

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

ROBINSON: When y'all would pick it and load it on the wagon, did you come up here to the cotton gin on Second Street, Planters' Gin?

BAILEY: Right.

GOODSILL: And then it gets weighed and then you get paid for it.

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: And then when the cotton is all picked, then does the same plant grow cotton again, next year? Or do you have to plant new plants?

BAILEY: You have to plant a new plant.

GOODSILL: So, did you have to participate in the planting as well?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. After you harvest all the crop, then you cut them stalks down. They wasn't good no more so you had to cut 'em all down. And then you could burn them up when they are dried out. Then you plowed the land over it. My dad had mules at that time. He didn't have no tractor. He had mules that he used. He had a plow (laughs) that he held on to. He didn't have no tractor at that time.

GOODSILL: That was hard work!

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am, that was hard work. That was a LONG time ago, though.

ROBINSON: That was before they had the disc machines and all those other things that you pulled. Just a single plow.

BAILEY: Right.

GOODSILL: And the thing about that life, as soon as you get through with one year, you have to START the next! Never ends.

ROBINSON: Did y'all have a garden, also? Did you grow tomatoes and other things at the house, too? Did you have a vegetable garden to keep up with also, while all this was going on?

BAILEY: We had a garden - sweet potatoes, and corn and black-eyed peas.

GOODSILL: Did you help with the cooking as well?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am. Me and my sister helped in the kitchen. We had an old wood stove then. We didn't have no gas.

GOODSILL: Tell me about cooking on a wood-burning stove. There are some tricks to it, aren't there?

BAILEY: On a wood stove, you cook good food, as you get used to them. She had a great big wood stove. It had a thing on the back that you heated your water in.

GOODSILL: Whose job was it to chop the wood?

BAILEY: My brothers chopped wood, and my daddy chopped wood.

GOODSILL: That's a never-ending task, as well. (laughs) Then when you're getting ready to cook something, let's say you're making the beans or the bread. You are cooking on top of the stove and baking as well, right? On a wood stove, the fire is underneath and there's an area where you can bake things? And on top you can cook the soups and the stews??

BAILEY: Right. You cook on the top and then you bake on the inside. There was a place separated there. The fire wouldn't get on your food. There was an iron part in that stove that separated the blaze.

GOODSILL: But now, we just turn the oven to the degree that we want it to be. How did you know how many logs to put in, in order to make it 350 degrees?

BAILEY: Well, it was just experience to know how much to put in there. If you put too much wood in there, it would burn your food up. But you put just a little wood in there, just enough to get it hot. It cooked just like the other stove. Mama got used to it--cooking bacon in it.

GOODSILL: OOOH, I bet that was good!

BAILEY: It was good.

GOODSILL: Did you butcher your own animals?

BAILEY: The hogs. And the chickens. But he'd go to the market and buy beef. We didn't have no cattle, but we raised hogs and chickens.

GOODSILL: How often did you get beef?

BAILEY: Maybe once a week. Wasn't no refrigerators then, either!

GOODSILL: So how did you keep your things good?

BAILEY: They had ice you could buy.

GOODSILL: Where did you go to get the ice? Or did it come to you?

BAILEY: You had to go to town to get your ice.

ROBINSON: Wasn't there an icehouse just past Eleventh Street, wasn't there?

BAILEY: Yes.

GOODSILL: So you'd go in, with your wagon or vehicle, and then bring back your ice and hope it doesn't melt too much on the way back?

BAILEY: It wouldn't melt. He'd put it in a sack or wrap it up in some paper and put it in a sack, and bring it back. Put it on the ground and wrap it up in cotton sack, and cover it up with a tub and it would keep pretty good, it did. Wasn't no refrigerators then. We wouldn't have been able to buy no refrigerators IF there had been some! Now some people had refrigerators but we didn't have them. And there wasn't many in existence at that time. Wasn't no electric iron. We didn't have no electric iron. We had one of them old black irons you set on the stove, called a smoothing iron. One of them old irons, you'd set it on the stove and get it hot. And then you'd take it off and iron your clothes with it.

GOODSILL: Did you have a lot of ironing to do?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: That must have taken a long time!

BAILEY: Once that iron got hot, it didn't take too long. It took some time to get them ironed.

GOODSILL: You would iron the 'fancy' clothes, the clothes you would wear to church and for going out?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: Workday clothes - would you iron your workday clothes?

BAILEY: You'd iron the working clothes just a little bit. But the Sunday clothes you had to iron them up pretty good. Pants and stuff, you'd put a little starch on them and make them look good. (laughs)

GOODSILL: Oh, there were a LOT Of people in the family. There were a LOT of kids and then the mother and father, so there was a lot to take care of, with the laundry. Who did the laundry?

BAILEY: The girls and Mama. We had a washboard -- we didn't have no washing machine. I guess don't want to know all of this, do you?

GOODSILL: I DO want to know all this! Who else can tell us this?! We're used to turning the oven on. We need to know the old-time way. (all chuckling) So tell me about the washboard.

BAILEY: You put your clothes in a tub and wash them.

ROBINSON: Where did the water come from?

BAILEY: You had to pack your water. We had a well that we pumped the water and packed it. Some people had windmills but we didn't have no windmills. We had a well. That water would be so NICE and cool when you pumped the water.

GOODSILL: What did you use for laundry soap?

BAILEY: They had washing powder you could get at the store. And they had soap; you could get bars of soap you could wash with. And sometimes they used to have an old black iron pot and they'd set it out there and make a fire around it, and put some water in it and boil your clothes, if you wanted to.

GOODSILL: If they were REALLY dirty, if they needed sterilizing?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am. And you'd wrench 'em out and hang 'em on the line--they'd get dry! (laughs)

GOODSILL: Everything took a LOT of work, didn't it?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. Yes ma'am.

GOODSILL: Going back to the ice under the tub, you would put things that you wanted to keep cold under the tub?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am. We put it on the ground and wrapped it up real good and cover it up with a tub or something. And it would keep pretty good.

GOODSILL: And no animals could get to them?

BAILEY: No, ma'am. Wasn't no animals botherin' that. At that time there wasn't.

GOODSILL: And what kinds of things needed to be refrigerated? Did you have butter?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. We had butter. We had milk.

GOODSILL: Once you made your dinner, and everybody had eaten, was there ever anything left over? Did you save your leftovers?

BAILEY: We'd have some leftovers sometimes. But the food didn't spoil quick, like it do now.

GOODSILL: Isn't that interesting! You make a pie and you keep it out for a couple of days. You don't refrigerate it.

BAILEY: Right. It holds.

GOODSILL: I'm interested in details of what life was like. Clothes - how often did you and your family get new shoes, for example?

BAILEY: I remember mostly at cotton picking time. They lasted pretty good, then. After cotton picking time, we'd go shopping. Sell some cotton and go shopping. Maybe twice a year.

GOODSILL: Now, were these fancy shoes or work shoes?

BAILEY: Work shoes. The fancy shoes, maybe once a year. Work shoes maybe once or twice a year.

GOODSILL: And when you're a little kid, you hope your feet don't grow too fast!

BAILEY: Right! (both laugh)

GOODSILL: And your work shoes were what? Now we wear tennis shoes or steel-toed boots. What did you wear to work in?

BAILEY: Well, they had some--wasn't too many tennies at that time that I can remember. Just had the regular shoes, leather shoes.

ROBINSON: Where did you go to town to buy them?

BAILEY: Up here in Richmond. There were some stores here in Richmond we could buy shoes at. They had some dry goods stores. They had several. One was named Goldstein's. Mr. Joe Oshman had a store there. And Edelstein had a store.

ROBINSON: Oh, the Edelstein sisters. I remember those ladies. Down there where the glass is. Yeah.

BAILEY: Right.

GOODSILL: Where is that. Be more specific.

ROBINSON: It's right by the restaurant - Lannie's restaurant. It had the two glass doors. And two ladies were in there.

BAILEY: And the R B Store.

ROBINSON: Robinowitz Brothers.

BAILEY: On the corner, in town. Then Mr. Robertson had a store down there in town.

GOODSILL: So, a lot of the merchants were Jewish. Are there certain stores that your family could shop in and certain stores that you couldn't?

BAILEY: Well, they could shop in them. Sometimes, if we didn't have any money, several people ran grocery stores, and if we needed some food, Daddy would tell them we need some food, and they were very nice. They would charge it 'til he was able to pay for it.

GOODSILL: Give credit?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. Credit 'til you get able to pay for it. And then when the farmer made a crop and made money, then he'd go pay 'em. They were very nice about that.

GOODSILL: Was it hard to make ends meet? I mean you were living close to the edge. You didn't know you'd have enough money until you sold the crop every year.

BAILEY: Sometimes it was. But we didn't have to go hungry because they would always help Dad out. When he'd go in and tell them he needed some food for the family, they'd say 'All right'. They'd make a note of it and then when he got his money, he'd go pay 'em.

GOODSILL: That's a pretty good system. Now, this is a hard question. Do you think, when he came in to sell his cotton crop, that he got the same price as the white man, who took his cotton in?

BAILEY: I'm not sure about that.

GOODSILL: I'm not either. I wonder, though. Maybe it was all the same.

BAILEY: Maybe so. I'm not sure.

GOODSILL: Was there a lot of distinction between the white and the black community? Would the white people stay in one area and the black people stay in another area? Not mix too much?

BAILEY: Well, I guess so. (demurring)

GOODSILL: You don't want to talk about that?

BAILEY: No, ma'am.

GOODSILL: I know it was different then, than it is now.

BAILEY: It was a little different then.

GOODSILL: So, tell me how you met the Wessendorffs, then.

BAILEY: When they bought that property from Blakely Winston, they build out there. Mr. Joe and them built a home down there. That's where I met them.

GOODSILL: And do you know what year that was, Joe?

ROBINSON: Around World War II, maybe. 30s, 40s, something like that.

BAILEY: I don't know what year it was, but I remember they bought it from Blakely Winston.

ROBINSON: This house looks pretty new in this picture. I can see the greenhouse back there, and it says December 1942. So that's what I'm guessing. And I did find one picture where Mr. Joe Clyde is standing in his uniform with some of the sisters, so I KNOW it had to be around there.

BAILEY: Somewhere in there, but I don't know when it is.

GOODSILL: Let me see a picture of the house. I'll take a picture of the picture! (shuffling of pictures in background)

ROBINSON: Man liked to fish, didn't he!

GOODSILL: So, they built the house and you got to know them then, and then what happened?

BAILEY: My sister worked for them a while.

GOODSILL: What did she do?

BAILEY: She was the cook for Miz Wessendorff and them. She cooked for them a while.

ROBINSON: Which sister is that? What was her name?

BAILEY: Leddie.

GOODSILL: Wait a minute. Leddie's not on the list. Is Leddie older or younger than you?

BAILEY: Her name is Dorothy but they called her Leddie for her nickname.

GOODSILL: So she worked there for a while, as a cook. And then, how did you come in to the picture?

BAILEY: I would go over there and do some washing and ironing.

GOODSILL: OH, more of that HARD work! (laughing)

BAILEY: (laughs) Yessum. But she had an electric iron at that time.

GOODSILL: Oh, uptown, right! Electric iron!

ROBINSON: Had electricity, number one!

GOODSILL: What did you think about that? Was that just easy?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm, that was easy.

GOODSILL: No spray starch, though. How did you do starch?

BAILEY: You could make starch. They had starch you could make it up in some water.

GOODSILL: And then what? Spray it on?

BAILEY: No, you make it in water and then you put your clothes IN that starch. It would fluid/liquid. Then you'd put your clothes in there and then hang them up and let them dry and then iron 'em. That starch would be IN 'em. Wasn't no spray starch at that time. Not that I can remember.

GOODSILL: I'm sure you're right. How do I know? All I know is spray starch! I have to talk to YOU to find out how it was REALLY done. (both laugh) So you did all the clothing, washing and ironing.

BAILEY: Some of it. Not all of it. I did quite a bit of it for Mr. Joe and Miss Janie.

GOODSILL: So that was around the 1940s and you were born in '27, so that means you were--fifteen?

BAILEY: Somewhere along in there. I was a chile.

GOODSILL: Okay. And then what?

BAILEY: I don't remember how old I was, but I was old enough to wash and iron!
(laughs)

GOODSILL: Well you learned that young! (all laughing) And then what happened?

BAILEY: Well, after my sister married, then I became the cook over there for Miss Janie and Mr. Joe.

GOODSILL: Were you a good cook?

BAILEY: They said I was. (laughs)

GOODSILL: I bet you were! (Asking Joe D.) Do you remember some of her cooking?

ROBINSON: I remember her cooking at two different places. She also came and worked for Miss Loise. So, yeah. That was after Miss Lucy Hines passed away and Loise didn't have anybody, so she took you away from Joe Clyde (laughing) and she'd come to the house.

GOODSILL: Tell me the the names of the Wessendorffs you worked for, in the big house.

BAILEY: Miss Janie and Mr. Joe.

GOODSILL: They had electricity, so were you then working on an electric stove?

BAILEY: She had a gas stove.

GOODSILL: How'd you like that?

BAILEY: All right. That was good.

GOODSILL: You must have loved being away from that wood chopping!

BAILEY: I did.

GOODSILL: And being able to turn it up to the right temperature made cooking easier?

BAILEY: Right.

GOODSILL: Did they have a dishwasher?

BAILEY: No, no dishwasher. I was the dishwasher!

GOODSILL: YOU were the dishwasher! (both laugh) So what was your day like? What time would you come in the morning and what time would you leave in the evening?

BAILEY: I'd come about 8:00 in the morning and about 2:00 in the evening, when I'd get through.

GOODSILL: You would cook a big meal for nighttime and leave it for them?

BAILEY: Sometimes I would leave something for supper.

GOODSILL: But usually they would eat their big meal during the day.

BAILEY: Right.

ROBINSON: How did it come to be that you lived in the little house on the property? Was that after you married Leonard?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm.

ROBINSON: That house was built? Or did they build that for you to have you and Leonard have a place to stay because they needed help? (showing picture of the house)

GOODSILL: Oh, that's a nice little house.

ROBINSON: Still out there.

GOODSILL: That's where you lived?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm.

GOODSILL: But that was when you were older. When did you get married?

BAILEY: In '48. After Mr. Joe, Senior, died. They needed some help over there because Miz Ruby Dillard...

ROBINSON: Was that the same family, the Dillards, which were out near Beasley?

BAILEY: Out to Kendleton. Yeah.

ROBINSON: Dad Dillard--Gary Dillard. I know his nephew. I worked with him when I worked at Texana for a while.

GOODSILL: So, you got married and you moved in to this little house.

BAILEY: Well, right away I didn't move in the house. This is such a long story. Miz Wessendorff had eye surgery. She had it in Houston, at the Methodist Hospital. This is a LONG story, but I can remember some of it. I don't remember what year it was, but I remember she had eye surgery. And she was doing pretty good and someway or another, she bumped into the door or wall or something, and then broke the stitches in her eyes. Then she wasn't able to see no more. She lost her sight completely.

GOODSILL: Oh, how awful!

ROBINSON: I was told that happened two times. She did it in one eye, and then a year or so later, she had the surgery done in the other eye, and then hit her head or something--the same thing--and ended up being blind in both eyes. That's what I remember being told.

GOODSILL: So then she REALLY needed help. Were you one of the people who helped her?

BAILEY: They had nurses. They had to have nurses to come in and help out. She had that accident like the last time, where she couldn't see completely. They had two nurses come out from Houston at that particular time. Miz Roland Kemp - I remember her name. She was a nurse from Houston. The next nurse from Houston was Miss Ernest Hale.

GOODSILL: GOOD memory! So they helped her to get over the initial part of it, but then did she need help with daily living? Did you do that or did they bring someone else in to do that? Dressing and bathing and all that.

BAILEY: They had some nurses here to do that.

GOODSILL: And your job was still cooking.

BAILEY: I kept on with the cooking and the house cleaning. She had two nurses here, a day nurse and a night nurse. Now the day nurse was Maxine Pustka. And then the night nurse was Miss Ethel Thompson. Miss Maxine, she lived in Rosenberg and Miss Thompson, she lived over here at the prison farm, over there, across the river.

GOODSILL: You just remember this clear as DAY! Where they white women, black women?

BAILEY: White women.

GOODSILL: Your job was to keep the whole household, clean and cook and keep everything going. That was a BIG job.

BAILEY: Mmm hmm.

GOODSILL: During all of this, did you have children of your own?

BAILEY: No, ma'am, I never had children.

GOODSILL: Well, that was handy because you had a lot Of work to do. (both laugh)
And did your husband work for the Wessendorffs?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am. He worked on the farm, helped with the cattle and keep the yard and everything. He chauffeured Miss Janie around when she had to go somewhere.

GOODSILL: Okay, are we ready to get to these pictures?

ROBINSON: The pictures might upset you, okay? (speaking to Hattie) Remember? Tell me about that day.

BAILEY: That was the day the house caught on fire.

ROBINSON: Tell me what you know. What happened that day? How did you know that it was burning?

BAILEY: I heard an alarm.



GOODSILL: Fire alarm?

BAILEY: Uh huh. A little alarm that went off in the house, a smoke detector or whatever you call it. And they always told me that when this thing--when you hear this thing sounding, that means the house is on fire. There wasn't no nurse staying here. The nurse at night was off. And I stayed with Miss Jane when Miss Thompson was off. And Miss Jane and I was upstairs and I had got her dressed and everything. We was ready to come downstairs. And I heard that alarm going off, and I told her, I said, 'Miss Janie, the house is on fire. We got to go downstairs.' She was easy to handle because I had been taking care of her for a long time since she didn't have no sight. And I caught her by the hand and we came on down the front stairs.

GOODSILL: So, she's blind. And you caught her by the hand and brought her down the stairs.

BAILEY: Uh huh.

ROBINSON: And that was a big LONG stairway.

BAILEY: Yeah, the FRONT stair steps. We never would have made it down the back one. We came down the front and when we got to the bottom, I said, 'Now, we're at the bottom. We've finished -- step off on the floor.' When we stepped off on the floor, I went on and carried her to the living room and set her down in the chair, and picked up the phone. And the phone was DEAD. Wasn't no phone. Leonard was out with the cattle and I had to call to Leonard and tell him to get in the car and go to town.

ROBINSON: Where was Leonard? Did you have to run to the field to get him?

BAILEY: He was outdoors. He had a few little cows he had to feed, laying around the house, you know.

ROBINSON: So it was up close to the house. He wasn't WAY off.

BAILEY: Leonard was just the other side of the fence, or something, right there. I left her sitting down in the chair in the house. We were downstairs. But when the house caught on fire, we was upstairs. The fire was burning over our heads.

GOODSILL: So then what happened? Leonard came?

BAILEY: Leonard got in the car and he come up here, to this place right here (pointing to a photograph).

ROBINSON: Was it here or was it down there on Second Street, in that little office.

BAILEY: It was this office, here.

ROBINSON: Have some water, Miss Dit.

BAILEY: Okay. Thank you. This was the office. I remember he come up here. He hadn't been too long opening this office up at that particular time. He had to come up here and tell Mr. Joe the house was on fire because the phone was DEAD. The wires and stuff were up above.

ROBINSON: These pictures say 1965 on the back.

BAILEY: Mmm hmm.

ROBINSON: And I thought this building was built in 1974. So that's why I was confused about whether he was down at 203 East Third Street or if he was up here at this office at that time.

BAILEY: I say it was here. I may be wrong but he hadn't been too long opening his office up when that happened. Because Mr. Joe, Senior, he was dead. He died in '55. I won't forget that.

ROBINSON: So he died in '55 and then she had the eye surgery--

BAILEY: In the 60s.

ROBINSON: --in the 60s, early 60s.

BAILEY: Yeah, yeah. Mr. Joe had passed away. Then she had all that trouble and needed all that help, because he was dead and gone. I remember the year. It was in the 60s but I don't know exactly what year.

GOODSILL: Why do you remember when he died so clearly? Tell me about that. You said you'd never forget that.

BAILEY: I was still working for him. He was SICK. And he died at home. Because they had a nurse come look after him. He had a male nurse to come look after him.

GOODSILL: That must have been a sad time.

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: So, we're back to the day of the fire. You've gone and gotten Leonard and he went and got Joe Clyde?

ROBINSON: He came up here and I guess Joe Clyde--there wasn't a fire hydrant out there--so there was no water to do anything with. I guess everybody just kind of went out and watched the house burn.

GOODSILL: What were you doing? You were with Miss Janie, just watching the house?

BAILEY: I was with Miss Janie. I couldn't leave her by herself because she couldn't see. See I'm the one that brought her out of the house when the house was on fire, burning down. There wasn't no nurse or nothing there. The nurse was off at that time. I stayed with her that night. I had her all dressed and coming down the stairs.

She was easy to handle. She held on to me. I said, 'Now you HOLD to me' and I hold on to the stairs and we came on downstairs. When we came downstairs and sat down in the chair where she sat all the time, and picked up the phone, and the phone was DEAD. I pulled the door open and told Leonard to get in the truck and tell Mr. Joe the house was on fire. He came on up here and told Mr. Joe that the house was on fire. Because the phone was dead. Wasn't no phones down there. I don't think there was but one phone on the place and that was in Miss Janie's house. And then Mr. Joe came on down and sent the Fire Department on down. The Richmond Fire Department came and then Rosenberg came. Like Joe D. said, didn't have no water. I think they got a little water from the river. I think they did run a hose to the river. But they didn't have water.

ROBINSON: That's a LONG way, though. That's quite a distance. I mean, looking at this picture from up above, this is when there was the flood, that's a LONG way to run a hose back there.

GOODSILL: So you remember just standing there, watching this, burning?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm.

GOODSILL: That must have been SCARY!

BAILEY: It WAS scary. Because I had taken Miz Wessendorff out and set her outdoors. We had a bench out there and I could set her outside.

GOODSILL: Did she need you to describe what was happening since she couldn't see it?

BAILEY: I told her what was happening. She set there. I grabbed a coat and put it on her because it was COLD that mornin'. She had a coat downstairs that she could put on, all the time. I just wrapped her up, in her coat. Set her out there on the bench. I sat out there with her.

GOODSILL: Do you remember what time of year it was? It was cold.

BAILEY: In the wintertime. It was time for it to be cold enough for a fire.

GOODSILL: So, then, the house burned right down to the ground, right? And then what? Where did you live? Where did Miss Janie live?

BAILEY: She lived with Miss Irma Dru, her sister. Mrs. Janie come and stayed at Miss Irma Dru's house, was on THAT end, down there.

GOODSILL: And what did you do?

BAILEY: I would come in and help out with Miss Janie. I still did the washing and ironing for Miss Janie and Irma Dru. I'd come over and spend the night with Miss Janie sometimes. Because Miss Irma Dru had another house. When the house burned down out in the country, she wasn't living in that house then because she had--You know where Miss Irma Dru's house is?

ROBINSON: Back over here. In my head I know where it is.

BAILEY: I can't think of the street but Miss Irma Dru had built her a home. Miss Irma Dru and Miss Libby lived over there on the one side.

GOODSILL: Was this house rebuilt?

BAILEY: This house burnt down and they built a new house on the SAME foundation. And that house is standing now, what they built on the foundation.

GOODSILL: Was Miss Janie ever able to move BACK into that house?

BAILEY: She moved back in the new house and lived in the new house until she passed away.

GOODSILL: And what year was that?

BAILEY: In the 60s is all I can tell you. I don't remember exactly what year, but in the 60s.

GOODSILL: And you lived in the small house on the property that whole time?

BAILEY: At that time we had to move over there so somebody could be there with her.

GOODSILL: What did she die of?

BAILEY: She died in the Polly Ryon Hospital. She was blind and she had to have one of her breasts taken off because she had cancer. I can remember all that. I can't remember what year it was, but I can remember all that.

ROBINSON: 1968--'69, I think. Something like that.

BAILEY: Wasn't Oak Bend, then, it was Polly Ryon.

ROBINSON: It's STILL Polly Ryon to a lot of use! (all laugh)

GOODSILL: So then, what happened in your life, after she died?

BAILEY: After she died, I came over and helped Mr. Joe and Miss Loise in town.

ROBINSON: For a while, didn't Joe Clyde come out and have breakfast at the house.

BAILEY: He used to come out, for a LONG time. He shore did.

ROBINSON: Read the newspaper and start his day out there.

BAILEY: I'd fix his breakfast for him. Sometimes he'd come down and eat lunch. I'd fix food for him. (laughs)

GOODSILL: And then what happened?

BAILEY: Eventually I moved and started working for them kind of regular, and then I think that was about the end of it. And then I got to be the cook for Mr. Joe and Miss Loise in town.

GOODSILL: (Directed to Robinson) What's your memory of that? You have a story about that, don't you?

ROBINSON: I just remember that I always thought that Joe Clyde TRULY enjoyed being able to come down and HAVE breakfast at that house. Read the newspaper. He'd start his day out there with all the cats. (laughing) And THEN, all of a sudden that disappeared for him because you weren't down there any more, Ms. Loise had you come cook for her. So he was all of a sudden on Ms. Loise's schedule and not his own schedule. It was just one of those things that happened. But I remember Miss Lucy Hines, cooked for Loise and Joe Clyde, and then she got ill. She lived in that two story house right across from where the George Family Development is, right on that corner, right there at Seventh Street and Austin Street. It's got attorneys in it now. I remember her. But yeah, Miss Dit would be at the house and it was different. Food was better! (everyone laughs)

GOODSILL: When you cooked at Miss Wessendorff's house in town, did she have gas or electric.

BAILEY: She had gas and eventually she got an electric stove.

GOODSILL: And which one did you prefer?

BAILEY: Well, I liked both of 'um. I had got used to--

GOODSILL: You've seen a lot in your lifetime, haven't you!

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: From the wood stove -- electricity was a BIG deal.

BAILEY: That's right.

GOODSILL: So, when you were little and didn't have electricity, and it would turn dark, what happened in your house then, at nighttime?

BAILEY: We had a coal oil lamp--kerosene lamp.

GOODSILL: Ooh. Did it have a smell?

BAILEY: (laughs) You had a kerosene lamp and you'd buy kerosene and put it in the lamp. It had a shade to it. It had a little wick and put it down in there, in the lamp. And then you took a match and light that wick, and then put the shade on. That's when you had lights when you didn't have no electricity.

GOODSILL: It makes me laugh, because when we have a hurricane, and the electricity is out, and it gets dark--we go to bed! We don't know what to do. No TV, no lights, no reading, no nothing. Gets dark, you go to bed.

BAILEY: Right. We had a kerosene lamp -- called it a coal oil lamp. And you had to go to bed, you had to blow it out. Some people had candles. I don't think there was too many candles at that time.

ROBINSON: How do you think the fire started at Miss Janie's? Was there a fire in the fireplace or something?

BAILEY: No, they said there was a short in the line.

ROBINSON: REALLY! In the electrical line.

BAILEY: That's what they said had caused it. It caught over here, and that's where all the wires were, upstairs.

ROBINSON: Oooh, where they come into the house, there.

BAILEY: And the wind was blowin', and whoo, that blaze--you can see how that blaze was.

ROBINSON: I'm just surprised that magnolia tree just in the back, survived it. And I guess the greenhouse made it through it, too, then. Kitchen, everything.

GOODSILL: Look, you can see the flames coming out of the top. That must have been a VERY scary day.

BAILEY: It was.

GOODSILL: And sometimes you must have thought, what if you hadn't been there. What if you hadn't woken up?

BAILEY: Right. It was really something, I'll tell you, that day.

ROBINSON: Were there peacocks at the house?

BAILEY: She had a peacock. Mr. Joe, Senior, liked a peacock, and Miss Janie raised peacocks for him, at that particular time. And that old peacock is STILL there.

ROBINSON: He's still there. Blue Boy is still there. I fed him the other day. He still greets us. He looks good. His feathers looked good today. But I remember going out there and seeing five and six of them on top of the roof, yelling.

GOODSILL: You know the sound they make? They are LOUD.

ROBINSON: They ARE loud.

GOODSILL: But pretty, aren't they?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am, they're pretty.

ROBINSON: He likes cat food, by the way. Cat food and seed. And then Oscar gives him some corn ever once in a while. So he's doing good!

BAILEY: That's good. I'm glad the varmint didn't catch him and eat him up. You had to be careful around there because them coyotes would get him.

ROBINSON: But he knows to get up in that garage. He gets up high. I think he's been there long enough. He knows. I don't know how old he is. I was thinking about that the other day.

BAILEY: I don't either. But he's been there a LONG time. All the peacocks are gone but him. They raised peacocks. She would set them with a setting hen. She'd hatch the little fellow somewhere. That was fun.

ROBINSON: I can just see Miss Janie. That's wonderful.

GOODSILL: Is there anything else I should ask?

ROBINSON: Oh, there's probably a BILLION things we should ask.

GOODSILL: Can you think of anything else that you think would be interesting?

BAILEY: I guess that's all. I can't think of nothing else. I used to make fig ice cream. Do you remember, Joe D.?

ROBINSON: FIG ice cream. YES!

GOODSILL: Well, tell us about that.

BAILEY: She had an electric freezer--ice cream maker.

GOODSILL: They had a fig tree?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. They raised figs. She raised figs on the tree out there. That sure would be some good ice cream.

GOODSILL: Oh, I bet fig ice cream was delicious. Were you ever around for that (to Joe D.)?

ROBINSON: I remember this.

GOODSILL: Do you remember him coming on the scene? Tell us what you remember about Joe D.

BAILEY: Well, I worked for his mother, Miss Nita, but I don't think Joe D. was there. He was kind of small at that particular time.

ROBINSON: Was that over on Burnet Street, in that house behind Mr. Winston's house?

BAILEY: Yeah! I worked for Miss Nita.

GOODSILL: What did you do for her?

BAILEY: Well, I was the cook there for a while. I just went from family to family (laughing).

GOODSILL: Yeah! That's a good thing! Remind us what Miss Nita was like.

BAILEY: Miss Nita was nice. She was a sweet lady. She really was. And Alma used to work for her.

ROBINSON: Alma. And her mother, Mabel.

BAILEY: Yeah. That's been a LONG time.

ROBINSON: I think it was Alma who named her daughter Mabel Anita? Or something like that. I think she named her after Miss Anita.

BAILEY: She did. I remember seeing it in the paper, when Alma died. What did she name that girl?

ROBINSON: Was it Mabel Anita or something?

BAILEY: Something like that. Sho' did.

ROBINSON: There was another lady who worked there, named Rosie or Rosa or something.

GOODSILL: So you don't remember Joe when he was little?

ROBINSON: Might have been before me. I was born in '51. You remember Mr. Joe M. Robinson?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. Sure I remember him!

ROBINSON: He was a good-looking guy, wasn't he?

BAILEY: He was!

ROBINSON: Joe Martin.

GOODSILL: What do you remember about him?

BAILEY: He was nice. Very nice. Him and Miss Nita.

GOODSILL: What was the relationship between them?

ROBINSON: Okay until I was about two (laughing). They were husband and wife. Until '53 or '54 and they got a divorce.

GOODSILL: I see.

ROBINSON: He came from the Robinson's family, over in DeWalt and that area over there.

BAILEY: Where did Mr. Hamp Robinson live, Missouri City?

ROBINSON: Yes, ma'am.

BAILEY: I can remember that. They used to come to the house in town.

GOODSILL: Oh, from here to Missouri City must have been a LONG way back then.

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

ROBINSON: No Highway 59. All we had was 90.

GOODSILL: Yeah, they are just other ends of the universe. (laughs)

ROBINSON: Sugar Land was way, way far away. It was dark, you know. All those signs that say Don't Pick up Hitchhikers. Because of the prison farm (laughing).

BAILEY: Just had one highway. One going down and one coming up. No freeways then.

GOODSILL: Do you remember Joe D. when he came to live with the Wessendorffs? You were a teen-ager then?

ROBINSON: Yes. I was sixteen, something like that.

BAILEY: Yeah, I remember him.

GOODSILL: What did he look like back then?

BAILEY: (laughs)

ROBINSON: Now be nice! (laughing)

GOODSILL: Tall? Kind of a gawky kid?

BAILEY: Uh huh.

ROBINSON: Uh huh.

BAILEY: He was VERY nice. Alissa was helping out over there, cleaning and stuff, and washing.

GOODSILL: He was just a little kid. You were the grown-up. (giggles)

BAILEY: What ever happened to your friend, that black boy that used to come visit you. Do you remember him? He'd come stay with you.

ROBINSON: Elwin? He'd come here sometimes and visit Joe Clyde, too. Is that who you're talking about, my friend from college?

BAILEY: Uh huh.

ROBINSON: He'd come visit the house sometimes.

BAILEY: Do you remember once or twice you and him come in and stayed down in the country. Do you remember?

ROBINSON: Uh huh. That was Elwin. I still see him. He lives in Houston and I see him.

BAILEY: I wouldn't know him, but I just remember him coming over there.

GOODSILL: What is his last name?

ROBINSON: Sims.

GOODSILL: You remember him being a nice kid?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. He used to come to Miss Loise's house, too, with Joe D. He'd come over there.

ROBINSON: That was in '69--'70, like that.

GOODSILL: You have a LONG history with this family! Don't you!

ROBINSON: She has a long history with a LOT of things! The Branch family has been around here forever and ever and ever. In my mind, the name Branch has been forever.

GOODSILL: Do you know how your grandfather, Mark Gibson, do you know how he came to get his property?

BAILEY: He bought it, as far as I know of.

GOODSILL: Where did he get the money? What kind of work did he do to make enough money to buy a place?

BAILEY: Well, he was farming. That's all I can tell you. Miss Janie always told me he was independent because he had people on the place, working for him.

GOODSILL: That's quite a thing.

BAILEY: He had a few cows and a few mules and horses. I don't know how he come by it, but he was the owner of it. Probably was cheap, then.

GOODSILL: Well, it might have been cheap, but STILL, you had to work hard to get enough money. Even if it was cheap, money was hard to get. So that's really quite an accomplishment. That's something to be proud of, isn't it?

BAILEY: Right.

GOODSILL: Do you remember his wife's name? This would be your grandmother.

BAILEY: Mary Jackson Gibson.

GOODSILL: Do you remember her?

BAILEY: I remember her. I was small when she died, but I was big enough to remember her.

GOODSILL: And your family still has this property?

BAILEY: No, ma'am. Sold it to Mr. Joe A. We got rid of it after--my two brothers went to the Army and the other one never did go to the Army. And then old Ed died out and my dad had to work hard to keep the taxes and stuff paid.

GOODSILL: If just a few people own it and then you have children all of them have to somehow keep it up and pay the taxes. And they have their own lives, and they go off. It's harder to keep it all together.

BAILEY: Right.

GOODSILL: But it's still there!

ROBINSON: You said you went to church on Sundays. Where did you go to church?

BAILEY: There was one up here. Pilgrim Journey.

ROBINSON: Pilgrim Journey right up here, right across from the property, then.

BAILEY: I used to go to that one. Then there was one down in the country, Mount Moriah, way down here on Grand Parkway.

ROBINSON: Is it that little white church, right there on the corner, just off the freeway. That little church that's still there!

BAILEY: Yeah.

ROBINSON: That's amazing.

GOODSILL: What's it called?

ROBINSON: Do you know where Z Bar Grill is? Right across the street. They've got two buildings now. The old church and then that Life Center or whatever that other little building is.

GOODSILL: So you went to two different places for church. And you go just on Sundays? Any other day?

BAILEY: No, ma'am.

ROBINSON: I guess it was the THING to load all up to go, wasn't it?

BAILEY: On Sundays, we had to walk, too. (laughing)

ROBINSON: Oh my! It's a good two miles just from where this house is now to that church that's still there, Pilgrim Journey.

GOODSILL: Two miles, in your fancy shoes? That couldn't have been fun. In the hot and the cold! Not so much fun. (all chuckle) Was there good singing in your church?

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. Had to walk to school.

GOODSILL: How far was school?

BAILEY: School was about three miles, I think.

ROBINSON: So, where'd you go?

BAILEY: Up here, on North Tenth Street. There was a school there when I was going to school.

GOODSILL: What was it called? I'm only asking you to remember sixty years ago!
(laughing)

ROBINSON: I can remember the A. W. Jackson School up in Rosenberg. I remember it.
But this one I can't.

BAILEY: I can't remember what that school was, in Richmond.

GOODSILL: Three miles to school. And three miles home.

BAILEY: Mmm hmm.

GOODSILL: Did you take time off during the cotton season to stay home and work? Or
did you continue to go to school.

BAILEY: No, we didn't go to school in cotton-picking time. School would start around the
first of September. And I remember being in high school where some kids weren't there
for periods of time during September, because they were helping get the cotton in. It was
always September, right before the fair, usually.

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. School was out until a certain time, and then after that we went
back. Most of the time they had finished picking cotton.

ROBINSON: Most of the time you were done in August or before school.

GOODSILL: Did you enjoy going to school?

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

GOODSILL: How far did you go in school? How many grades?

BAILEY: To the eighth grade.

GOODSILL: And that's pretty much when you started working.

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. Right.

GOODSILL: Did school end then? Or you just finished school?

BAILEY: After I got to the eighth grade, I just stopped. There wasn't no school bus for us
to ride to school.

GOODSILL: That's an awful burden for a child.

BAILEY: Right.

GOODSILL: And so you wanted to make some money, and work.

BAILEY: Yes, ma'am.

ROBINSON: School was a luxury.

BAILEY: Mmm hmm. And if I'm not mistaken, Miss Janie was the one that got them to run a bus through here, back from down yonder, for the children to ride the bus to school.

ROBINSON: I know she was involved with education.

BAILEY: Yeah! The PTA.

ROBINSON: She was superintendent of the PTA and then she was state PTA or something. She was BIG into the education.

BAILEY: She traveled a lot. She was busy all the time. Before she lost her sight. Leonard used to drive her different places.

ROBINSON: She'd go to Washington and places, too. Big, just WOW things! Now, during the war, do you remember her helping with rationing and things like that? Do you remember when all the guys were gone and she was here. She was on the board of Fort Bend National Bank, because there were no men to do some of these things. Do you remember any of those kinds of things that she did?

BAILEY: No, she done so many, I don't know what-all she didn't do!

ROBINSON: I know she was in DAR and the Confederate Women and teaching stuff. She started the Richmond Garden Club.

BAILEY: Yeah, she done a whole lot! I can't remember all of it, but I remember some of it.

GOODSILL: Well, that's a GOOD interview and I want to thank you SO much for coming in. I totally enjoyed hearing your stories.

BAILEY: Well, I hope it was help.

GOODSILL: You WERE some help!

ROBINSON: Huge help.

Interview ends