# FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE*

Interviewees: **Herman Westmeyer**

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*Transcript*

GOODSILL: Mr. Westmeyer you were born November 15, 1912, which makes you 101 years old at the time that we are speaking. So nice to talk to you.

WESTMEYER: I am very, very happy to visit with you.

GOODSILL: The Dust Bowl is our topic today. Will you tell me about the Dust Bowl?

WESTMEYER: Well, the Dust Bowl was a booger (chuckles). I had gotten out of the University of Missouri in January 1936. The worst dust storms in Kansas were in 1935, so we were just coming out of these dust storms. I was looking for a job. Times were tough and jobs weren't plentiful. I was fortunate enough to get a job as a County Agent in Kansas. A County Agent's job was to follow the current trends in research in agriculture and pass that on to the farmers. So I got that particular job. I was moved from eastern Missouri to the southwest corner of Kansas. The southwest corner of Kansas was one of the dirtiest spots in Kansas. I was fortunate that I didn't have to stay there. I was moved on to a better position.

GOODSILL: Wait a second, when you say dirty what do you mean?

WESTMEYER: Dust storms, dust blowing through. When I got sent out to southwest Kansas, I stopped in the agricultural office out there, and asked the girls where was a place that I could live. So they told me that the druggist in that town, Hugoton, had one of the best houses in town. It was a brick house and had a big basement. They were boarding school teachers—male schoolteachers--and maybe I could get a place to stay down in that basement. That is what I did. I went up to visit the man, and he had one spot open that he said I could use for my home. That was when the dirt was still blowing.

This was a GOOD house—a tight built house, but in through the windows—even well constructed windows—the dust would drift through. So the next morning when you woke up why you'd have dust on your sheet. So that is what we're talking about—dust storms. I was living in one of the better houses—why I was fortunate to get a place like that in which the dust was a nuisance. It was not overwhelming like it was in a lot of the poor houses that were not well built. I met a female schoolteacher soon after I got there. So I made a DATE with her one night. Well, the dirt started a blowing that night. I thought well I'll still go on that date. In the block there were four houses, and I knew (chuckles) which house she lived in.

As I drove down the street, I missed it the first time the dirt was so thick. So I had to turn around and drive back in the storm to find the house, which I did. We had a nice chat and I went on home. That is what you get involved in when you are trying to live in those kinds of conditions.

GOODSILL: Now go back a little bit and tell us what caused the dust to be blowing.

WESTMEYER: We blame it on the farmers and one thing or another. If you read history, the first settlers that came to Kansas looking for a place to live classed the western Kansas as a desert. We have a large area out there where the grass was short and slightly vined. The reason we had this was the lack of moisture, lack of rain. That is why those first people called it a desert.

And then people plowed up the grass to plant wheat. And it is just that simple, they tore up the grass, which was the only cover that the land had to keep it from blowing away.

GOODSILL: In Manhattan, Kansas, I went the Natural History Museum. They had Lucite tubes that showed what the grass looked like above the ground and how deep the root system went beneath the ground. That was just fascinating. Can you tell something about the roots of the prairie grasses?

WESTMEYER: Well, that is what has transformed this thing from a desert to agricultural ground. The grass that we grow out here is a short grass not a tall, tall grass, a short grass, and it has nice long roots to it. So if we don't have much rain this year why, it can still grow to a certain extent, and protect the surface. What actually went on back there in those days was that we had plowed up a lot of the grass and there was no vegetation cover to keep the wind from blowing the soil. We had a particular tool that we used back in those early days. We called it a one-way. It was a disk type machine or tool. They built those things about 12 feet long and a tractor pulled them. They would slice the grass and the vegetation and the weeds off of the surface to get the land ready to plant the wheat. Well, when we don't have rain, we don't have moisture, and we don't have much vegetation growing ... that leads to trouble.

GOODSILL: I heard that the first few years when the settlers were there and they busted the sod—is that's what it's called—busting the sod when you break the prairie grasses? The first couple of years they had wonderful crops. Am I correct?

WESTMEYER: When we had moisture, good rains, those years we grew wonderful crops. We had the moisture to do that. Now when we hit one of those dry years, or like we did back there in the 1930s, hit four or five dry years then we had a problem. That was the situation that developed the big, really the nasty dust storms.

GOODSILL: Will you tell us the years that we are talking about.

WESTMEYER: I would say that they started in about 1930, let's see, 1932. Thirty-two probably was a bad year. Thirty-three was a bad year. Thirty-four was bad. And then come 35, THAT was the worst year as far as the Dust Bowl was concerned on these prairies out here.

GOODSILL: Were you on the job during those years?

WESTMEYER: Well, let's see, I graduated in 1936. So I came out here right then. In 1936 we had a bad year. But '37 wasn't too bad. Then it got a little better. Then in '38, we were raising a pretty good crop of wheat. Then when we got into the 1940s why we had some good years and had enough moisture so that we had good crops—and incidentally the prices wasn't bad either, comparatively speaking. So that kind of brought the folk out in this area back again to where they were enjoying a decent life.

GOODSILL: Are wheat crops still grown in Kansas now?

WESTMEYER: Oh yeah! Now like I say, we had this one-way plow, a disk arrangement that just sliced the weeds off the top of the surface and got the ground ready to plant the wheat. Well, we learned that we needed to use a shovel contraption that would leave a little fuzz. That way the ground wasn't laying so open to the wind. If the wind starts blowing, why it would blow a little off the top of the fur, but it wasn't blowing like it did back in those first days.

GOODSILL: So one of the things you were able to teach the farmer was not to use the one-way. What else were you able to teach them?

WESTMEYER: Well, I'll tell you what (chuckling). The one-way was really the only machine that they had back in those days. The big companies manufactured these tools. They manufactured these one-ways. They weren't manufacturing plow type machines. Oh, let me tell you about this. In one of the counties I was in I had what I would call an innovative farmer. He built himself a shovel-type cultivator.

One thing too about this area, they liked BIG tools. So he built himself a shovel-type tool that was 12 feet long. He would cut quite a swath as he went through. Incidentally, the man got along all right on account of John Deere, one of the big machine companies even back in those days, they bought him out and started making his machine.

The big machine companies started building machines that, well put it this way, the government and County Agents started recommending. That machine did a great deal to make things better and they are still using it to make this country livable.

GOODSILL: What other recommendations besides changing the tools? Was planting or building hedges recommended.

WESTMEYER: Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of one of the presidents, was a great one on promoting hedge rows. She got to promoting these mass shelter belts. They were fine. They helped to a certain extent, but they weren't really the answer to the big deal. Now here is a little side issue. They are awful good to those where you had a good shelterbelt. You usually had good pheasant hunting in them! (chuckles). I went pheasant hunting in lot of those shelterbelts. (laughter)

GOODSILL: So new instruments, and some hedge rows, but what was the main education you needed to do—what was the main thing the farmers needed from you as an agent?

WESTMEYER: One practice that they were doing when I came out here was cultivating the ground for one year, keeping it clean, keeping the weeds out, and one thing and another to store the moisture that had fallen that year and use two years of moisture to grow the next wheat crop. Well, you can see what happens if you are going to keep that ground bare a whole year, why that gave it a lot of chance to start blowing. So we quit what we called summer fallowing because of that.

Oh yeah throw in another little deal. I was working with the agronomist at Kansas State University, and I would go out at wheat seeding time and I would have me a rod that I would poke down in the ground and see how much moisture there was. This ground out here was real good in storing moisture. I would measure the depth that the moisture was down in the ground. If you take a rod and push it down when you get to that dry ground, boy it stops (chuckles). It don't go much more than that. So the agronomist had me measuring the depth of the moisture in the ground in areas that had been handled in various ways during that year.

GOODSILL: When you figured out how deep the moisture was, what did you advise the farmer?

WESTMEYER: When he wrote his little bulletin, he emphasized the fact that you needed at least two feet of moisture down in that soil to plan on much of a wheat crop. If you had two feet of moisture down in the soil and you got a half way decent rainfall during the growing season, why you got along pretty good.

GOODSILL: What if there wasn't two feet of moisture? What were they supposed do with that land that was already plowed?

WESTMEYER: Most of the farmers would go ahead and plant their wheat (chuckling). And they just prayed for rain.

GOODSILL: Was it just an environmental phenomenon that there was such low rainfall during those years—'33 to '37?

WESTMEYER: Yes, now like I said, if you read some of that real early history, they classified this area of the western end of Kansas as a desert. Still if we get 11 to 12 inches of rain it is a good year. That's the reason we need more than one year of rain. But if you get to using more than one year of rain then you are getting into other problems. We have learned how to cultivate, how to maintain the land. We don't try to destroy the weeds and so forth that are growing on the land. We try to cultivate them into the top part of our soil, and that will keep the soil from blowing too much. We have changed our cultivation methods. They don't solve all our problems, but they sure make a lot of difference.

GOODSILL: I read somewhere that they were advising the farmers instead of doing long, straight rows that they were supposed to do diagonal rows or something like that.

WESTMEYER: Oh, well, no, they are supposed to follow the slope of the land. In other words, terraces are what we call them. That will build a ridge the same height clear across that field. In other words, when we get into a valley, why we change our direction, so that we have terraces, as we call them, ridges that will maintain the water so the rainfall doesn't run off.

GOODSILL: So it is not to keep the dirt from blowing, it is to keep the rain on the ground once it falls.

WESTMEYER: Yeah, it is to keep the rain soaking into the ground rather than running off so that you have a bunch of creeks running up and down through your fields.

GOODSILL: Tell us something about the aquifer beneath Kansas.

WESTMEYER: Oh, oh, now somebody is going to be in trouble. [Sighs]

GOODSILL: Oh, oh

WESTMEYER: This aquifer—it doesn't refill. We pump water to irrigate; we are doing a wonderful job of irrigating. But we are using more water than the rainfall is refilling in this aquifer. I am wondering what it is going to be like say 25, 50 years from now because if we keep our feedlots out in western Kansas and keep growing corn to feed those cattle and pumping water out of the aquifer to grow that corn… [sighs, indicating trouble in the future.] Someday things are going to have to change one way or another, and I haven't figured out how.

GOODSILL: I know we are pumping more out of the aquifer than gets refill. But when it rains, it does filter back down to the aquifer. Are you are saying that it does not refill fast enough?

WESTMEYER: Yes, let's say we get a foot of rain over this summer, why a lot of that will run off as it evaporates, a lot of it is used up by our present crops. We don't have a system for that water to seep down and refill that aquifer. Like I said, I'm curious as to what is going to develop here. What we can do to help it and so forth.

GOODSILL: Do you think it could be that in 25 years we have a desert in western Kansas?

WESTMEYER: I don't think it would be a desert, but my thought is that we are going to have to doing a better job in maintaining our moisture than we did back in the early days. We need to use the moisture that we get in rainfall in better ways.

I don't know whether you are familiar with Garden City and Scott City. They are out there on pretty near the end of Kansas. If you are driving down the highway from Scott City going to Garden City, you go past a little town by the name of Shallowater. The aquifer is a little deeper some places and a little more shallow other places. That highway crosses a little creek there between those two towns. When rainfall was good, why you will find, I'm talking about back in the old days before we got irrigating quite so bad, the water from that aquifer is up on the highway. In other words, it isn't down in the ground (chuckling). The aquifer is that high. Now they tell me it's a hundred and some feet deep to get to the aquifer from there. You see how we pumped that water out of there. It is a SITUATION. We are going to have to change our ways.

GOODSILL: Might it be possible to have another Dust Bowl in the future?

WESTMEYER: I would say no. I think our agriculture is smart enough to keep from having one of the extreme dust bowls. But I'm afraid that we are going to have some problems. I hope we change our agriculture in such a way, fast enough that we can still have a good life out in that area.

GOODSILL: It is my understanding that a tremendous amount of the topsoil actually blew away during those early years of the 30s. How has Kansas continued to be a prosperous place for agriculture when they lost so much of their topsoil?

WESTMEYER: Well I tell you what, when you come here in Manhattan and start digging down, it does not take you long before you hit rocks and not topsoil. While out in this tremendous area that we have, starting up in Nebraska and going down through Kansas into Oklahoma and Texas that is tremendously deep soil. So there is a lot of topsoil there. There is a lot of soil there.

GOODSILL: In the time that you went to work as County Agent, was it like the was government coming to the rescue of some of these exhausted, discouraged farmers? What was their response to you?

WESTMEYER: Of course you always find a scoundrel here or there, I tell you, I was very, very pleased. The top agricultural people came out and they were LOOKING for ways to handle this thing. When I was out there in my early days, not in my later days, but my early days, the government sent word out, let's gather up a dozen or so of these farmers in various counties out in where I was located so we can talk this thing over. I would hunt for people that I thought were progressive farmers and that type. We had, well, I don't remember the exact number 12 to 15 people from eight, ten counties talking this thing over. They would take the advice of the agronomist specialist from Kansas State and other people like that and they'd KICK that thing around. People like that, groups like that are what brought things around to where we are using different tools to take advantage of what we have.

They were anxious to try and figure out WHAT they could do. So they took the word of this person and the word of that person and this kind of machine and that kind of machine and threw it all together. I tell you we had a bunch of WONDERFUL people all through Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. They were TOP individuals that were trying to figure out how they could do this. They were anxious to use the information that we might pass on. Incidentally, when I found this two-foot of moisture, they kind of perked up there—listened just a few minutes. They were the top end of the farmers out in that WHOLE large area of wonderful people. They were smart individuals.

GOODSILL: Was there any money that the government was helping with? Were they helping financially in any way?

WESTMEYER: Well, yes we had a crop loan—what we called the crop loans program where the farmers would apply. In other words if they didn't have a crop of wheat, they wouldn't have anything to sell to buy gas for the next crop. There was the crop loan program, which was a GOOD program. It didn't solve all the problems, but it sure helped in a lot ways.

Now let me throw another thing in. I had just moved out to Dodge City, and I had a farmer come in to me, and he says--help me get a hundred dollars to buy my gas to plant this next wheat crop. He said he had the seed. He had grown enough wheat last year to have the seed. He had the ground worked ready to plant the seed, but he needed some money to buy the gas to run that tractor. So we sat down with the crop loan man. He had borrowed a little the year before, and he hadn't paid that one off. But they did—that crop loan program did help boost—now just like that guy. He got his money to buy the gas. He planted the seed. The next year while he did not have a bumper crop, he had a pretty good crop of wheat to start again.

GOODSILL: That's a good story.

WESTMEYER: Yeah we did have that particular program out there. That was a good program.

GOODSILL: Also, this drought is following right on the heels of the Great Depression financial depression in the U.S. So it had to be hard time all the way around.

WESTMEYER: You bet, you remember I said that jobs were hard to get when I got out of the university?

GOODSILL: Yes, sir

WESTMEYER: I was hunting for work, and they offered me a job out here. Think about that just a little bit. I was born and raised in eastern Missouri. I knew a little dust in the air once in a while, but I didn't know anything about those dust storms.

GOODSILL: You probably had a pretty steep learning curve!

WESTMEYER: (laughing) I sure did. I tell you, I got out there and I wondered, I wondered what I was doing out there. Then—I have a JOB! So, yes this drought followed a tremendously bad economical year.

GOODSILL: Did this job that you took kind of by accident, did it turn out to be something that you are pretty passionate about?

WESTMEYER: Well, I had gone to the university. See, my old dad, I tell you there is a wonderful man! He used the County Agent back there in Missouri and I was in the 4-H Club program. I thought I'd just kind of like to be a County Agent, and that is where I started from. As I worked my way through college, why I was working in that type of an area. Did I mention that they had kind of promised me a job as an Assistant County Agent? I'm sure you are not familiar with the fact that the old Triple A program, which started up back there in 1936 was ruled unconstitutional.

GOODSILL: What is the old Triple A program?

WESTMEYER: That is the farm program, the government program. (chuckling) One day my main professor up here, he came by and he says, "Well, got a little bad news. We don't have a job for you." And that was right about the time I was getting ready to graduate. He says they ruled this farm program unconstitutional, and that's the money we were using to pay some of our County Agents. So we better start looking for something. He helped me—wrote a few letters to a half a dozen states wanting to know if they could use a County Agent. And Manhattan, here in Kansas, came back and says yeah they needed some County Agents. They didn't know me. I would have to come out for an interview. I came out and never left.

GOODSILL: You must have done something right Herman, because you were as green as they come—didn't know a thing about it all did you?

WESTMEYER: (chuckles) That's right, that's right, yep.

GOODSILL: Listen, that farmer that you mentioned that had his seed and was ready to plant it… I think when the farmers first came out they were planting a certain kind of wheat. What are they using now? Tell me about seeds.

WESTMEYER: The University had an agronomy program testing seed and developing new varieties that had a little different quirk here or there. When Kansas State would come out with a new variety of wheat and said it was going to yield a little better than the old variety, why I got together with the farmers that were planting the seed and those developing it. I would get them to sell the seed to my farmers (laughing). It would take 10, 12, 15 years to get a new variety that was really good. But nowadays, I tell you, technology is going so far. Now they are dealing with the genes in the seed and instead of just picking out seeds that produced a little more than the other seed. We are way ahead in our agricultural technology. These farmers are telling me it costs a hundred dollars just to plant an acre of wheat. Raise some wheat if you are going to spend that much on the seed. Yes, the agronomy folks all through the country are doing tremendous good with developing things in both the crop field and the animal science field.

GOODSILL: Is it just the quantity of wheat that is important or they doing drought resistance seeds as well?

WESTMEYER: Yeah, both. In Kansas our biggest wheat producers are out west. So yes, I tell you these blasted agronomists are smart guys. They have developed seed that has a number of features. Not just, well, are we are going to get an extra bushel here? They have got higher quality wheat, better gluten in the wheat, those kinds of things. I tell you we've got a bunch of mighty good professors.

GOODSILL: Back in the years of the Dust Bowl, I've read that there were lung diseases and problems with breathing from having all the dust in the air. Do you remember anything about that?

WESTMEYER: Oh, there isn't any question about the dust. The first county I went out to had six old people in the morgue because it was too dusty to dig in the cemetery to bury them. They had all died of dust pneumonia. You bet, I tell you, there is a lot to this Dust Bowl business. It isn't just a little dirt flying around.

GOODSILL: Was the government able to help in any way with the illnesses?

WESTMEYER: Boy, you got me there. I'm not sure just what—I can't answer that. I just don't know.

GOODSILL: You told me about the dust on that one date. But you were in some pretty bad storms? What did you do to protect yourself?

WESTMEYER: Well, you just tried to avoid the dust as much as possible. You tried to find places to live so that you would have a place that you could halfway sleep well. But no, the dust was a big factor in the health of people back in those days.

GOODSILLL: It sounds like it just affected almost every part of life.

WESTMEYER: Yep, I would say you are correct.

GOODSILL: I bet you were glad whenever you could come in and take a shower and get clean.

WESTMEYER: (laughing) Yeah, I was glad when I crawled in that little old closed in basement that was pretty tight.

GOODSILL: Yeah, but that was part of the problem you couldn't use a lot of water to clean because there wasn't much water. There was a drought.

WESTMEYER: Well now we didn't use a lot of irrigation water. See back in those days we are not talking about having any irrigation. I was out there—gosh I don't know how many years was it—telling you about this little town of Shallowater. I was out there when ground water was available. If you got a pump you didn't need much mechanics to pump it with but good old arm strength—pumping all the water you needed.

GOODSILL: Is it true that modern development happened after World War II? Everybody came home and wanted to have a house of their own with a lawn and access to a golf course and pumping water from the aquifer was required to allow this kind of living?

WESTMEYER: Yeah, that reminds me Barton City has a wonderful golf course. And if they are going to have a wonderful golf course they are going to have to pump a lot of water on it. So they are, and they are using up water from the aquifer.

GOODSILL: What else should I ask you that I haven't thought to ask?

WESTMEYER: We've gone over a good deal of what went on. It is just NATURE. We have contributed a little here and little there, but dry years are going to cause DIRT. Now this day and age why we have a lot of practices that will help us out in those dry years. But I tell you, you just sit around and you try to dictate something to nature and you are in trouble. (laughter)

GOODSILL: You just put your finger on it.

WESTMEYER: You know, having lived through this, why I enjoy talking about it with people that don't have their minds all set up. We have people now who say tings like, "If you had any sense you wouldn't let this dirt blow" and stuff like that. Nature does as it dang well pleases! Just mark that one down.

GOODSILL: Nature was the teacher here. The people did what they thought was right. It turned out it wasn't right. Then they had to rethink what they were doing. Nature taught them. Well, Herman, this has really been great. Thank you so much. I so enjoyed talking to you.

WESTMEYER: Well, I've enjoyed this little session.

End of Interview