

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Jane Marshall Goodsill**

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Interviewer: Lisa Deland

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

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Repairing Jane's house on Bolivar Peninsula

Transcript

DELAND: Today, we are discussing storm experiences. Some of your comments may be used to accompany the Fort Bend County's upcoming exhibit entitled "Tropical Impressions".

I'm so glad you are here to speak with us, Jane. As a resident of Bolivar, before Ike hit, can you set the scene for us a little bit, so we have a sense of what it was like beforehand?

GOODSILL: I can! We would come down often and visit fiends who had houses on Bolivar Peninsula. We had no intention of buying a beach house, but spent some time here and we were liking it. Our friend called one day and said, "There's a really cute looking fish camp down here for sale. You should come look at it." We got in the car right then and drove 2-1/2 hours! Found it, drove right by it, and my husband, Bruce, said, "We should buy that." I said, "We should??" He said, "Yes!" and so we did. It was a modestly priced house, not fancy, and it needed a lot of work. And we were VERY eager. So we did a LOT of work. Painting, repainting, emptying everything that was in the house, nothing in the house was usable. Scrubbing on our hands and knees on the floor, with every kind of solvent we could find, to take off the tackiness left by the stick-on the linoleum that had been on the floor. That was a really backbreaking job.

Another backbreaking job was trimming the two great big, huge, palm trees at the front of our house. They were going to be really cool. But they were VERY dirty. They had those beards of the old palm fronds hanging down. So Bruce got up there with an extension saw, stood on a ladder, stood on the roof, he used his arm too much, wrecked his shoulder which had already been wrecked from all the painting he'd been doing inside. The paint wouldn't adhere to the ceiling, so paint layer after layer after layer! As we got all the bearded stuff down from the trees, in the dead heat of summer, we found roaches and bats and anything you could imagine up there. It was a mess! And then we had to rake it all up and haul it off. It was a BIG job.

So we were working like crazy. Six weeks later, we hear Hurricane Ike is coming into the Gulf. And it's going to hit Galveston! Three days before the storm, we have to evacuate the Peninsula. But as a final effort, we got up on a ladder with our broken shoulders (laughs), I'm holding the rickety short ladder and Bruce is swaying on it as he hammers plywood boards on the windows. By God, we were going to save those windows!

Let me go back just a little bit. When we bought the house, six weeks earlier, we had it inspected. The inspector was kind of a round guy, sturdy but round. And there was a small opening that went up into the attic. So he climbed up the little ladder and weaseled his way up there. It wasn't easy — but he got up there. He said, "OH, WOW." And I'm down below, and can't see a thing because he's filling the entire hole, and I say, "Oh, wow, good? Or oh, wow, bad?" He said, "Oh, wow, GOOD." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because the guy who built this house attached every ceiling joist with bolts not nails. This roof is not going anywhere! You have a hurricane, this roof is staying on this house." "Whoa, really?" So we all climb up, one at a time, to look at this marvel. "OOOOOH, AAAAAH, OOOOH, good." Bruce had said this was a good house, so by golly, now it's proved it's a good house.

The guy who built this house, we think, worked at Texaco and maybe used some of the supplies from there, or maybe just used his ingenuity from there. All the pipes underneath the house had gauges on them and were made of copper. WAY more 'stuff' to make the plumbing work than you could possibly ever need. But it was about a fifty-year-old house and it was fairly close to the ground. The stilts were not tall like they build them today.

So we evacuate the Peninsula, leaving the house behind. We're exhausted and CRIPPLED! (laughs). We go home to Sugar Land and we're waiting as the hurricane inches forward. It's ALL there is on the news. We feel like our life has come to a total standstill. It's HOT before a hurricane, and still. We were just waiting. I had this odd feeling. "It feels like I'm just waiting to die." I didn't really think that I was going to die, but somewhere in the world, things were going to come to an end because of this. And we were just waiting to see what that end would be.

My family, in other parts of the country, wasn't concerned. They weren't calling or writing us emails or saying "We're thinking about you. How's it's going?" It was just a non-event to them. And we're waiting. Reports said the hurricane was going to cream Galveston. It's going to run right through Houston, Sugar Land will not be spared. It was a BAD path for people in our area. Interestingly enough, it was about 100 years after the BIG hurricane that totally wiped out Galveston. Bruce grew up in Sugar Land and knew that the storm was serious, but he said, "You can't over-react. Nothing you can do until it comes. So let's stay calm." So we stayed calm but it was VERY boring. And anxiety-ridden.

The storm comes and we hear nothing on the radio but BAD news about Bolivar. It seems as though Bolivar was pretty much Ground Zero. We can't get down there, no TV coverage yet, no videos, no airplanes flying over. Everything is dead still and we're thinking, "Oh, no. What could have happened down there?"

We were imagining that wood came off the windows, the windows all got splintered, the inside of the house is filled with glass, maybe rain water, maybe storm water. "Oh, it's going to be bad." HA!

What happened is, the storm surge (rapidly flowing water) raised up to about twenty feet above ground level. Our pilings were probably ten feet tall. So that would mean that ten feet of our living space would be under water, or something like that. Who knows? We weren't there.

Most of the homes just sort of splintered and turned into shreds; dissolved from being under water and from the velocity of the wind and currents of the surge. Our house, (chuckles) as predicted by Kim Noble, the inspector, did NOT shred to pieces. Our house lifted up off its pilings and floated through the subdivision and landed, KERPLUNK, one corner in the earth, about 600 yards from our lot. Two ends were gone, but the long sides of the house were still intact. The glass was gone but the window frames were there! Good thing we boarded them! (The boards had disappeared.) The roof was on, as Kim Noble told us it would be. The nest that the owl had been living in the upper right corner of the house was still there—the owl wasn't anywhere to be seen. There was virtually no wild life to be seen.

When we bought the house it came furnished. There was a very cool American Standard cabinet and in it was a double porcelain sink. The porcelain sink was still there, cabinet crushed but the sink intact. And the wood floor that we had spent SO much time getting that sticky linoleum off—I had used EVERY solvent I could think of and done it three times, and it was STILL sticky to walk on. Well, after all that time with salt and sand water agitating around (makes whistling noise that sounds like agitation), it was sand-blasted so clean we could not believe it! It was the most perfect, beautiful wood.



No more sticky floorboards, thanks to Hurricane Ike!

It was almost fifty-year-old pine. You can't get wood like that anymore.

They FINALLY allowed us to come on the peninsula—I don't know how long it was, a month? Coming from High Island to Crystal Beach was just like being in the middle of a war movie, like a bomb had gone off. Everything was brown with sand, because the ocean had risen and gone all the way over the main highway (87). You could barely see where the road was because it was all covered with sand. Silt everywhere. Cars had floated in the tidewater, were upside down, sideways, golf carts everywhere. Trees were halfway over, roofs of houses were off and sitting in the middle of the highway. Where houses had been was nothing but pilings. It was very eerie. The word unbelievable comes to your mind, and yet, there you are, living through it.

We had gotten our tetanus shots since we knew we were going to be working on the remains of our house. We had some silly notion that we would be able to salvage some of our belongings. Everything was destroyed, floated away, crushed or had sat for hours in unsavory liquid with gasoline, salt, and septic material. We did rescue the porcelain sink. And then we began to slowly harvest the wood off the floor with a crowbar, one plank at a time undoing the tongue and groove and stacking piles and piles of planks. We



Destruction and devastation after Hurricane Ike on Bolivar Peninsula

We didn't know why we were doing this, but we thought, "It's good wood. It survived Ike, we should honor it." This work was our tribute to our strong little house.

Rebuild? It was not even on our minds. It was all too shocking. It took about three years for the amnesia to set in and for us to forget the trauma of the destructive force of nature on that community. Finally we decided, "Okay, we'll take the plunge." So we built this house we are sitting in today. We used the salvaged wood in several ways. Our carpenter planed it and used it around our kitchen island and as wainscoting. And he built in a desk in the back bedroom. Our furniture-maker friend, W. T. Hawkins, built us two card tables and several side tables of this wonderful solid wood, which we use for dining and games in our new home. We are hoping that storm was a hundred-year event, so we have

another hundred years, before another one hits, if we are lucky.

DELAND: Well, thank you, Jane. I have a couple of questions. I have had a chance to drive around the neighborhood and I can tell there were some houses that were obviously here before the storm and there are some houses that were obviously built after the storm. One of the things I noticed is the height of the stilts seems to have changed. Can you talk a little bit about that?

GOODSILL: I don't know if there was a regulation before Ike on how high you needed to be off the ground. Maybe it was just whatever the builder thought would be the best height. Since the storm surge was so high in Ike, they have increased the height of the pilings required. If you're going to get insurance, you have to build, I don't know whether it's eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one feet above mean sea level. You have to have straps that hold the house to the pilings. And there are other things that need to be done to meet the current codes. Most of the original homes that were in this neighborhood were built before there were such codes. They were just fish camps, beach houses. There were a few of houses built to code, before Ike, and they did survive. So that's the good news.

DELAND: Thank you. Another thing that I noticed is that some the houses have what appear to be garages, and some don't. Can you tell us a little about that?

GOODSILL: You can build a garage under your house and cover it in so nobody can see what's in the garage, but you have to build with breakaway walls so that if there's a strong current of storm water the walls will wash away. You don't want to have a structure standing on the ground that blocks the flow of water. However, your insurance rates go up a LOT if you have an enclosed structure below your home. So many of us have elected NOT to have enclosed structures beneath our homes, but to have a small shed to the side, which are uninsured.

DELAND: Okay, I'm noticing outdoor showers. And elevators. What about these things?

GOODSILL: Outdoor showers are a standard thing at the beach because it's so pleasant to be able to shower in the out of doors. You don't want to get sand in your home and into your septic system. Sand will block up the little holes that regulate the septic system and it won't work properly. Outdoor showers is how you manage that problem. Some people may not be fit or are elderly or they want to take groceries up and down, so they build elevators. This is an odd thing; Ike came through and destroyed some homes, which were uninsured.

For some reason the federal government rebuilt houses for them. The owners can live in them or rent in them for two years and then the house belongs to them. All these FEMA houses have elevators, due to the American With Disabilities Act requirements. I don't quite understand the rationale for why a person who DIDN'T have insurance gets a free house, when those of us who DID have insurance have to build back at our own cost.

DELAND: What was your level of preparation for this storm?

GOODSILL: Well, we were ingenues. We didn't know anything about preparing a home for a storm. But I think we did a pretty good job, preparing. However, as it turns out, you can't really prepare a home against wind and storm surge like Ike. It didn't matter what preparation we did, the house was doomed to either turn to splinters or float away. Not very many houses in the neighborhood floated away. In fact, I think ours might have been one of two. Which is a testimony to how well it was built. We were proud of our little house! (chuckles)

We did as much preparation as we could. And the main preparation we did was get off the Peninsula. Some people stayed here and paid with their lives. Others survived but had terrible experiences to tell. One story we heard was that a couple was in their home, up on stilts, and the water begins to come in. And so they move up on top of their furniture and counters. And then they move up into their attic. This is hearsay, so I don't know if it is true—a man and a woman were in the attic and they were hearing the sounds of a hurricane, which are evidently just atrocious. Wind AND creaking AND boards banging and (makes a screeching noise) AND waves pounding the house. BAD noises as houses around splinter and tear from their pilings. And keep in mind all this is happening in the dead of night. The woman says to her husband, "So now we're in the attic. There's no other place to go. What are we going to DO?" And he says, "We're going to die. I love you." As it turns out, at about that time the water stops rising and they survive. But it was pretty harrowing. So the BEST preparation is to leave the Peninsula.

DELAND: Well, so far in this session you have talked about the anticipation you felt, as you were back in Sugar Land, awaiting news of the storm, its making landfall and then, subsequently, the number of days that it took before you were allowed back on the Peninsula. Then the amount of time it took for you to decide to rebuild. Is there anything else you want to say about that sense of waiting that you had throughout the entire process, from the onset of the storm until you rebuilt?

GOODSILL: That waiting had a sense of powerlessness to it. It was very difficult. It created a LOT of internal anxiety. Everything is ostensibly fine in your world but you know it will not be for much longer. We were all still shell-shocked over New Orleans' experience with Hurricane Katrina so fear is not far behind the anxiety. I wanted to be productive but there was nothing to do. Shops were closing or sold out, no errands to run, too distracted to focus on work, roads were crowded with evacuees. I didn't have anything to do but WAIT. So I gardened, but I was thinking, "I'm gardening?? In a few days this could all be destroyed so why am I bothering to get the yard perfect?"

As it turned out, Sugar Land DID get hit, trees uprooted, limbs, roofs and some flooding. Our house was fine except for some limbs down; we had a lot of wind. But in a neighborhood very close to ours they had two solid weeks without any electricity, any air conditioning, any refrigeration. No ice, all their food spoiled. We were lucky. For some reason we were on a grid that was re-energized about four days after the storm. But you just never know. I had put water in the bathtub and done everything I could do, and felt like that was good. Some people did all that and STILL were out for two weeks. That will just destroy everything in your freezer and interrupt all your plans, going to work, taking showers, and staying clean.

The only good thing that I saw from that is that no TVs were on and all the doors were open, and people suddenly began to talk to each other. Everybody you passed on the street, as you were wandering around, you'd talk to. Everybody became neighbors. Everybody was in it together. THAT was very dear.

DELAND: I see that on your face.

GOODSILL: I had definitely underestimated the force of nature before this experience. If I was camping in a thunderstorm, "I'm in a thunderstorm. This is EXCITING!" Now I'd probably be more cautious because thunder usually has lightning with it. And thunder has water with it. I'm more careful to pick a site that is either covered and protected and higher. I UNDERSTAND the force of nature now.

I do have a funny story to tell. I grew up in Honolulu and Honolulu has some hurricanes but not too many. But it does have tsunamis. The tsunami warning system was a BIG deal. It might have just been installed when I was a young girl. So, the first of every month they would test the sirens. I can't remember what they sounded like! I SHOULD remember. (wooo wooo wooo).

They would do that for about five minutes, at noon, on the first of every month. That was to make sure that the system worked. And to tell us all, if they went off at any other time besides the first of the month at noon, we were supposed to go to high land. As it turns out, my family's property WAS on high land and we didn't have to worry about tsunamis, except maybe being out of power. It was never really something we ever thought about or worried about.

We were raised on stories of the 1946 tsunami that hit a little town on the island of Hawaii, called Laupahoehoe. What happened is, the waves came in BIG—BIG, BIG, BIG, BIG. Then the water receded way, way, way out. All the little school children and their teachers went out to look in wonder at what had been the sea and was now seabed. And out they went looking for shells, and fish and wouldn't you know, the next wave of the tsunami came in and killed them all. Also we knew of Hilo, the town on the Big Island that would regularly get wiped out. It has a curved bay and the tsunami would go (makes swirly sounds and twirls hand) and everything in that bay would just get whirl-pooled-out. So we knew the seriousness but nobody really paid THAT much attention, as I was growing up.

After Ike, I go to visit my mother, who's living in a tall building. We can look out, ALL over Kahala, which is a VERY flat plain out of which Diamond Head crater had erupted eons ago. It used to be seabed, with all coral underneath the soil.

This plain is barely above sea level, and the sea is RIGHT there gently lapping at the shore of Kahala Beach. I'm awoken by the siren (wooo-wooo-wooo) at 3:00 in the morning. I get up and I go to the Safeway, which is not very full to my GREAT surprise. I'm buying water, and I'm buying canned food and batteries. Got everything I needed. Came right home. My mother stumbled out of her room and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm getting ready for the tsunami." She said, "Oh, we never worry about that." I said, "Well, I DO! I've been through IKE and I am going to be prepared!"

I knew the building had a generator so that the elevator would be able to move up and down. But if we didn't have any power in the apartment, I had all the water we needed, and I got all the food we needed, and I was READY! The emergency service had issued an evacuation warning for all the hotels in Waikiki, on the other side of Diamond Head from us. Where were those poor people going to go?

I try to go to sleep and I can't. When the morning comes I'm leaning out the window watching. Thinking I will watch the tsunami wave come ashore, a storm surge like Ike. I KNOW that it may not be a twenty-foot storm surge and it may not be a big wind event, and it may not be violent, but if a couple of feet of water comes in and floods the homes of Kahala, every refrigerator, every washing machine, every dishwasher, every appliance, every electrical plug, all the drywall, every carpet, EVERYTHING that I'm looking at from here 360 degrees around me, is going to be WRECKED! And if it comes up a few more feet all the car engines are going to be wrecked. At 4 AM I had driven my car to the top of a nearby hill and walked back down to the building, and I'm READY!

The tsunami came in. It was a RIPPLE and everybody was laughing at me, my mother and friends included! It was kind of funny! But I'll tell you that I have no regrets. I KNOW I did the right thing. You don't know when it's going to happen and you want to be prepared for when it does. So, yes, it had an impact on me. Storms don't scare me but they make me vigilant.

DELAND: Well, my next question has to do with your belief system, and how does that weave into your experience with Ike?

GOODSILL: I think the temptation at times like this is to take it personally. This happened to ME. This destroyed MY home. This destroyed MY community. This came in, Ground Zero, right at MY house. Somebody was aiming for ME! (chuckles) But that's not the philosophy I came away with from Ike. Things just happen.

For a little while, it affected my belief in the beneficence of the world. I thought the world was not a safe place. We can't wander through it as innocently as we did before. WE need to be vigilant. My fundamental belief is that there are some powers that are greater than myself. And some things I have no control over, and I simply need to do the best that I can to get out of the way and survive. There are certain powers that are quite strong and there's going to be a consequence when those powers come in to play. What you need to do is deal with the event, figure out how to endure it, how to live through it, and be grateful to be alive.

DELAND: I have one last question that I feel you've already touched on but I want to see if you have anything else you'd like to say about power and powerlessness.

GOODSILL: Well, going through a major hurricane is a reality-check. Just because you have a tall, strong, well-built house on the beach doesn't mean too much when the force of nature is upon us. It's humbling.

I am so much more aware now. When I hear of fires in California, and tornadoes in Oklahoma, and ice storms in the northeast, and tsunamis in Indonesia, or earthquakes in Haiti I feel VERY compassionate.

I am also VERY aware of the human effort that is required, the ingenuity that is required to repair storm damage (finger snap) on a dime, so that people can have their TVs, and their heat, and their electricity, and their comforts.

The people who go out, either into these storms or immediately after these storms to do the repair work, are the heroes. And I know that in MANY emergencies, people from other communities, other states, will drive down to help. People had come down from New York to help reconstruct the power lines on Bolivar. When we saw them passing, we would all stand and cheer! It was very heart-warming how the community pulled together. In Sugar Land citizens who did not even know each other went out into the streets to clear the storm drains in case we had more rain.

So whereas we are powerless to what the damage may be, there is a LOT of power in how people can come together to fix it. The financial cost of acts of nature is truly astounding. The wholesale DEVASTATION when large areas get wiped out by fire, by landslides, by earthquakes is humbling. To fix destroyed infrastructure is an incredibly daunting task; water lines, power lines, communication lines most of which are UNDER the earth. (Bolivar didn't have drinkable water for months — think of Haiti!)

Repairing damage is an overwhelming task, often lengthy and VERY expensive. I know in Texas we have emergency rainy-day funds, and it's a good thing. Every state should have them. And I still don't know if it's enough to combat Acts of God.

One other thought; the Earth is a system in constant motion. It is not a static system. We sit on a fairly thin mantel that appears stable to us as we build our homes and water lines. But we sit on top of a molten core, which is subject to the convective currents of any molten body. The earth's crust is constantly moving. The Earth is subject to forces of gravity from within and without. Winds and tides and storms are continually forming. It is naive for us to think that we are 'safe' from natural phenomena. We are part of a wondrous universe in which change is the true nature of things.